



↑-a  
headphone  
actor-

# カゲロウデス

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## Kagerou Daze II - a headphone actor

### Headphone Actor I

Only me and my shadow stand still in the corridor of sunset.

Earlier, I could overhear music broadcasted by the radio from the headphones that hung around my neck.

But now, I hear noise, as well as something resembling a person's voice.

The atmosphere was obviously different, so I put on my headphones, curious.

The intermittent voice gradually began to form words.

It seemed like a news interview of some country's president.

It was like a performance, with an exaggerated voice, and a slightly delayed simultaneous translation.

There was quite a lot of noise mixed in, but I could somehow make out a few parts.

".....it's a very unfortunate.....thing.....but.....today.....the world is going to.....end"

Once those words had been said, I could hear many screams and an enumeration of words I couldn't understand.

Even if I removed the headphones, the appearance of pandemonium was conveyed so clearly it hurt.

Outside the red-stained window, a crescent moon was afloat in the deep purple sky, obscured by so many birds; it was almost like a cluster of black ants.

Removing my headphones, I went back to my room, and glanced around; a half finished game and a mountain of textbooks reflected the sunset, glowing orange.

I wonder what I was doing until now.

I had a vague feeling that I was talking with someone a few moments ago, but I couldn't remember anything more.

".....It's surely just some kind of joke"

I whispered, in an attempt to persuade myself; opening one of the windows lining the corridor. Once I did so, I heard a loud siren I'd never heard before, along with the cries of people.

That noise slowly becomes louder and louder, engulfing the whole city.

My lips are shaking, my teeth are chattering.

I am alone.

There's no one left here anymore.  
And soon, I too will cease to exist.  
My heartbeat quickens, and my tears tell my cheek.  
— — — — — I hate being alone, being alone is scary.  
So I can run away from a world being swallowed up by a whirlpool of despair, so I  
can separate myself, I wear the soundproof headphones once again.

The sound of the radio has stopped, and I can't hear anything but noise now.  
“.....Shall I just give up on everything already.....”  
The minute I murmured that, I felt like I heard something.  
When I listened carefully, it seemed to be a voice talking specifically to me.  
— — — — — And finally, I realized.  
That voice, it was none other than my own.

“Hey, can you hear me? You still have a place you want to go to, and something you  
want to say, don't you?”

I couldn't remember what those things were.  
But, for some reason, I felt like I understood the meaning of those words.

“It's alright, trust me. If you can just reach that hill, you'll learn the significance of  
this, even if you don't want to. If you stay here, you'll just disappear. Hey — — — — —  
—”

As I wiped away the tears that threatened to fall again, I took a deep breath.  
“You want to survive, yes?”  
That day, when the world ended.  
With my own voice as my guide, I ran with all my strength on the trembling ground.

## **Yuukei Yesterday I**

I woke up to the piercing noise of my alarm.  
  
I stretched my hand out beside my bed, fumbling to reach for my mobile phone.  
  
After turning off the alarm, I checked the time, and let out a large sigh.

... This is strange. No, this is really, really, strange. It is definitely strange.

After all, I should've slept for at least eleven hours.

Yet, why in the world am I so sleepy? This is way too unfair. Even though I paid a beautiful high school girl's "Late-Night Time" as compensation, the satisfaction my body got in return was way too little.

Something wasn't right. Are you trying to say that I'm just not beautiful enough ...? Though once I'm awake, I'll just end up playing that online game; but even so, I did pay compensation.

A sense of fatigue flows through my entire body, "Wait! If you don't sleep some more, you're gonna die. Think about it again!"; that danger signal is emitted.

My brain received the warning, and began thinking of "A way to comfortably stay in the futon".

For example, Strategy 1: Feigning Illness

Right now, I'm living with my grandmother, so it's just the two of us. If I tell her "I don't really feel very well today, so..." I'll be able to skip school pretty easily.

I'll feel pretty ashamed about deceiving my grandmother, but on this occasion, I suppose you could say it can't be helped.

But, this strategy isn't good at all.

To say I'm "not feeling well" is quite untactful, as my grandmother will find it best to immediately send me to the hospital.

Ugh, there'll be a medical examination, and then I'll be hospitalized ... When I think of these things, a chill runs down my spine.

Also, in the ward, I'll barely be able to play my game, and I'm sorry, but I'd rather not spend my free time just doing absolutely nothing.

The thing is, everyone's just too nervous about it. Even with the symptoms of this "illness", I don't think it's something that life threatening. Everyone's just exaggerating it.

My late grandfather was particularly nervous, and was always worried about my illness. He pulled a lot of strings and arranged things so that the high school I'm entering this year will treat me with great caution.

... Well, I guess if I suddenly collapsed in the classroom with a crash, it would be troublesome to people around me, and above all, it would be quite embarrassing.

"Thinking about it, this current situation is probably the best."

— — Living while thinking in this way, half a year passed. Ever since I entered the school, I have yet to make real friends, but it's not like I have any problems with this.

Anyway, after this and that, Strategy 1 is a failure.

The time it took to compute all this was about two minutes. Considering the "law of the speed that time elapses in the morning," it would probably be said that my speed of thinking was overwhelmingly fast.

Strategy 2: "Actually, school is closed today."

I could tell my grandmother that school's actually closed today... but thinking about it, yesterday evening, when she asked me; "Should I make you a packed lunch tomorrow?" I remember replying, "Yep, I want to eat tamagoyaki!"

... I'm such an idiot! Why tamagoyaki!? Rather than a packed lunch, I should've requested an "Extended Sleeping Hours Ticket" or something. Although such a thing obviously doesn't exist.

Almost contrary to my thoughts, the wonderful scent of eggs wafted up to my room. In response to yesterday's request, "Chef Grandmother" was surely preparing my packed lunch wholeheartedly.

Feeling guilty for trying so desperately to find an excuse to skip school, I sighed, "Ugh..." I wonder how much misfortune I am to my grandmother.

Turning around, I dive back into my futon for a while, resetting my thoughts.

... Even so, I wonder how my grandmother manages to wake up so early like clockwork, day after day. I can't think of anything other than the possibility that she's some kind of super precise computer. Literally, a computer grandmother ...

— — While I was pondering such nonsense, I could hear a creaking noise of footsteps as someone walked up the stairs. This noise in an old, peculiarly constructed wooden building, created a horror movie-like atmosphere, scaring me. No, this was certainly a person arriving to wake me up.

I instantly cover myself with my futon, and attempt to find one last way to resist.

Ah... There's no more time... Strategy 3... Strategy... Strate...

"How long are you going to sleep for!! Hurry up and get ready before you're late!"

"Uuuu .... aahh"

Mission Failed.

As the intensely bright sunlight rains down on me from the opened curtain, in my head, I imagined red letters flashing: "GAME OVER"

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Mid-late autumn weather.

The hot summer days where the heat haze shimmered ended, autumn passed, and the landscape of the school route starts to look completely like winter.

Winter clothes also began to appear among the students on their way to school; sweater-wearing boys and girls that seemed to get along, flickered into my field of vision.

— — While showing a blatant disgust towards those students, completely shutting out their conversation that set my teeth on edge, and aiming to head to school in silence, I, Enomoto Takane, was in a very bad mood.

But this probably wasn't something to be particularly noted on. This was my default.

Because I had the habit of staying up late at night, when I was woken up by the morning sun, I would get irritated by my drowsiness.

Once the afternoon came around, I would be irritated by the attitude of my classmates and teachers.

Because of that, the expression in my eyes always looked bad, and I was often asked, "Are you angry?"

And each time, I would get irritated again; it was a vicious cycle.

Although that made me seem silly and frivolous, and likely to spend all my time fooling around, I didn't think my personality would become like that, nor did I want it to.

Becoming irritated at such a stupid delusion of my own future, I trudged on towards school in my usual grumpy mood.

However, because the distance from home to school was rather close, there wasn't any need to use the bus or the train, or better said, it was help to no one.

At any rate, I never had to bother to use any strength to go to school, and more importantly, I could sleep in until the last minute.

Because of that, in the time that would probably be spent rushing to transfer lines in the train commute to school, today as well, I could leisurely wake up, and easily pass through the school gates fourteen minutes before homeroom.

Reaching the straight path in front of the school gates, the number of students wearing the same school uniform increased at once.

Naturally, I increased my walking speed, and the look in my eyes became even worse.

At the side of the school gate, I removed my headphones, wound up the cord, and put them in my bag.

I had come to rather like the headphones that my grandmother bought for my birthday. The looks were cute, and the sound was good. Although I say, “the sound is good,” ever since the time I borrowed my classmate’s earphones, I’ve thought, “Somehow, the sound is dull”; they really weren’t any kind of high-quality product.

However, to me, who had gotten used to them, they were my one and only partner.

Once I nodded to the rugged PE teacher standing in front of the gate and entered the school, I saw the lively bustle of activity because of the school culture festival that was now one week away.

In the very center of the roughly ten-meter wide road that extended from the school gate to the main entrance, there were preparation spaces set up for each class’ act.

I saw strangely-written warning signs, like “Wet paint!! Don’t you dare sit!” and material-requesting posters that said things like, “Looking for cardboard! If you can offer any, please contact 2-A Executive Committee!”

As I looked around, I wondered from how early in the morning everyone had started working from. There was already students with paint-smeared clothes, students dressed in some kind of monster costumes, and even things like “‘It’s the school culture festival, so let’s all do our best together’-type of girl” that seemed like she was about to cry, saying “Because the guys won’t do it properly ...” The scene that I saw was exactly like the “Realization of Youth.”

— — However, for me, who was the “type of girl that usually hands out snide remarks and quarrels, and only during times like these, will work together with her fellow students,” preparations for the school culture festival was nothing but a hindrance.

Furthermore, during the period of preparation, the school gate would become increasingly noisy from the festival excitement; there would be detention until

midnight, and people that would be flirting and breaking the rules, so it was generally not good.

And after the actual day of the culture festival, there would be an abnormal pile of trash left behind.

What was with this unproductive event? It was ridiculous.

Now that I thought about it, in the newspaper that had been distributed yesterday, I had written that the first year B-class I was “temporarily” a member of, was going to do the traditional event that had probably been done to death in this world: “maid cafe.”

Far from having planning meetings, this event hadn’t even come up in normal classes; to me, this was a completely irrelevant thing, and was even something of a convenience.

If I actually put on maid clothes because of a sudden impulse at one am, I would become burdened by the work of a memory that couldn’t be wiped away in a lifetime.

Thinking and worrying endlessly about that kind of thing, I passed under a huge model of a dinosaur, dodged and glared at a stupid-faced boy fooling around in the middle of the road, and headed for the main entrance.

Pushing the door handle of the door that was so weathered the words “push” couldn’t even be read, the school building I set foot in was at a quite adequate temperature due to the power of central heating.

I took off my outdoor shoes, and looking at the indoor shoes that were to be taken out of cupboard, this wooden foot locker was also considerably old.

I had heard that the school building itself was equivalent to a historical building, and was proud of producing many students, including famous people like politicians and celebrities.

Although, to be honest, before bragging about its history, I wanted to them to hurry up with the renovations. Rather, this was the demand of the majority of the students.

The school building we were proud of had a hole in the gymnasium roof, left from the summer typhoon, and the bottom of the drinking fountain had fallen out; it had become a rather painful incident.

Particularly, around the first really hot day of summer, the incident where all the air conditioning in the school had broken was very problematic, leading the students to roll out complaints like, "I want to change schools as soon as possible."

However, during summer vacation, the apology-filled air conditioning repairs resurrected the cooling and heating.

The students that tried to devise an extension to summer vacation to shield the complaints towards the school facilities, too, were obligated to reluctantly attend two semesters of school.

On top of the drain board, I changed into my indoor shoes, and hurriedly exited to the hallway.

In my school life, this moment was the most bitter.

While everyone harmoniously turned left in the hallway in front of the shoe cupboards and proceeded to the second floor where the normal classrooms were, I was the only one that turned right towards the classroom zone for subjects with few students. In particular, I headed for the classroom that always had the foreign scent of chemicals drifting around.

Yes, my "normal classroom" was the "Science Preparation Room" with a nursing homeroom teacher.

In recent years, because of the development of the nearby city and the rapid increase of students that came with this, the normal classrooms were all relocated for other classes, and presently there was no classroom to use for the "special needs class"; That was the reason.

As far as equipment went, having desks and a teacher's desk was enough to call it a classroom, but I'd like you to try thinking about it. Most of my time in these wonderful three years of high school life would be spent in a classroom breathing in the smell of formalin. Thinking about that, it made me feel rather depressed. However, currently, including me, the students that attended that class were only two, so that made it fairly easy to spend with how quiet and peaceful it was. About the illness I had, if I were transferred to a normal classroom now, there was that concern about becoming some kind of burden, which was why I was my current situation without any complaints.

Proceeding down the hall, and checking that there was no one around, I let out a huge sigh.

Passing art rooms, music rooms, and home economics rooms, in the hallway on the left-handed side that led to the clubroom wing, there was a plate facing the right that said, "Science Preparation Room."

— — Underneath that, there was the familiar pale green sliding door.

Because I had various complaints, it was a sense of relief that this classroom didn't have many people.

At any rate, the teacher would be late as usual, as well as that one classmate; the 'my pace' guy that drew pictures all the time.

While thinking, "I guess I'll sleep a bit before the teacher comes", I opened the door, and there, an unexpected scene that blew away my drowsiness jumped out at me.

"Good mor— .... wh— uwaaaah!!"

"Eh? Ah, Takane. 'Morning~"

There, returning my greeting with a bright, clear smile, stood my classmate, Kokonose Haruka.

Just by looking at him, he had sickly, pale skin and an easygoing demeanor. His hobby and talent was drawing pictures. Including his name, he seemed like a girl, but he was just a normal guy.

However, right now this guy was not "normal."

— — No matter where or how I looked ..... He wasn't wearing anything other than his underwear.

"Wh— ..... wha— .....!?"

I was speechless at this unrealistic scene first thing in the morning. Although I was trying desperately not to focus on him, he was rapidly advancing towards me in that state.



“Ah, hey hey, I want you to listen to this .... This morning, at the fountain in the school courtyard, there’s a cat that comes around, and I thought about petting it, you know. But like, how should I put this, it dodged me really well. And then I lost my balance, and fell into that fount— —”

“I-it’s fine!! It doesn’t matter how it happened!! H— .... Hurry up and put some clothes on!!”

Without showing any urgency, and with an expression that was like, “Ah, what should I do,” Haruka, who had tried to talk indifferently about how he’d come to become half-naked, merely tilted his head a bit in regards to my desperate shouting.

“Ehh? But my clothes aren’t dry yet. See?”

While pointing to his uniform that was drying in front of the heater, he was showing me a behavior as if I was the one that had said something wrong. That distance between us was 50 centimeters.

Leaning back because of this too-unrealistic scene, I fell back into the door I’d just closed with a crash!

And while colliding with it, I threw out desperate suggestions.

“Ah, ah, ahh!! I got it!! It’s fine if they’re wet! J-just put them on for now!! I’ll go look for a jersey or something, so just put them on until then!!”

“Eh? H~m, okay .... But um ..... Huh? My shirt isn’t here .... Shirt~ ....”

“You’re stepping on it!! Under your foot!! Aah, geez! Give it here!”

Was it because he didn’t feel the seriousness of “being half-naked in front of a girl”? Moving with the slowness of a turtle, Haruka finally began to get dressed.

However, that wasn’t a situation that I could just watch over leisurely.

Snatching the shirt that Haruka had picked up, and turning a blind eye so I wouldn’t have look directly at him, I tried to force him to wear it.

“Uwaa—! No, it’s fine, I can put it on myself! Wait, that’s the other arm~ .....

“Gyaaaa! Stop moving!! Don’t face this way!!”

No matter how anyone looked at this, it wasn't a decent situation. Why should I be forced to dress my half-naked classmate first thing in the morning? If he wasn't a classmate, it was at a level when I could have just quickly handed him over to the police.

However, if anyone saw us in this situation right now, it would be extremely bad.

It would be like what often happened in shoujo manga, and possibly be misunderstood ... was what I was just thinking, when the worst case scenario happened.

"Alri~ght, homeroom is starting~ Uh ....."

Accompanied with a flat voice, the door burst open with a rattle, and there stood our homeroom teacher, and also the teacher in charge of teaching science at this school, Tateyama Kenjiro.

Tateyama-sensei made an appalled expression that could have rivaled my own from earlier, and the attendance book slowly fell out of his hands and onto the floor

"Ah .... no ..... Um, Sensei, this is ....."

"Ah, Sensei, good morning~"

In contrast to me, who immediately had a chill run down my spine, the half-naked Haruka returned the greeting with a smile.

Objectively, at a glance, this situation could possibly be seen as "a bad schoolgirl that strips a naive high school boy, even early in the morning."

Although that moment didn't last long, it felt much longer than it actually was. As I wondered what conclusion Tateyama-sensei had come to during the silence, he uttered the words, "Oh .... I've interrupted something .... Sorry ....." and tried to exit into the hallway.

"Gyaaaaa!! It's not!! It's not what it looks like! This guy, he .... h -he was fooling around without any clothes on, s -so I was just trying to put some clothes on him!!"

With an ambiguous expression, Tateyama-sensei, who was about to leave the classroom, stopped in his tracks.

"Eh? Ah, ahh, what, is that what this is? .... Ahh, no, I thought that surely you hadn't been able to hold it in anymore ....." Tateyama-sensei sighed, and picked up the attendance book while smiling.

"Please stop saying those kinds of things on a regular basis! Anyway, if that really was the case, that would be a serious matter, wouldn't it!? Didn't you just intend to run away!?!"

"Ahh, well, see, if it became some kind of trouble, it'd be the easiest to just say 'I didn't know'. Plus, it's that, you know. After all, I want to give you a carefree environment to grow up in, with freedom to do what you want ...."

"You're the worst!! Anyway, please lend a hand in dressing this guy! I'll tell the principal!"

Although Tateyama-sensei was scratching his head like it was a bothersome thing, the moment the word "principal" came out, he gave one word of "OK" and began putting clothes on Haruka at lightning speed.

You most likely wouldn't encounter such a "poor example of an adult" very often.

In a certain meaning, he really taught us valuable lessons, but .... The time that I fully realized that lasted only a moment.

"Ueee ... it feels gross to be soaking wet, Sensei ....."

Haruka, who was dressed again from Tateyama-sensei's nimble handiwork, let out a terribly gross-sounding voice and sat down in his seat.

The moment that I, too, finally sat down in my seat, I was stuck by a tremendous fatigue.

Because of this guy's doing, just how many of my hit points been taken away first thing in the morning?

There probably wouldn't be even one thing to laugh about today after all of this .....

Facing the two desks was the teacher's desk, positioned slightly elevated from the rest of the room. Tateyama-sensei sat down in the slightly tall, metal folding chair and opened his attendance book.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I'll go get you a jersey to wear later ... With that said, good morning. Ah~ You two are here. I really have to applaud your hard work of coming to school every day without growing tired of it."

".... That's not something a teacher would say."

While lying his head down on the desk, Tateyama-sensei muttered in a dull voice, "If the teacher's said it, then *isn't* it something a teacher would say~?"

Was our society peaceful because this kind of person had become a teacher?

However, I was honestly concerned about this country's future.

"Ah~ So about today's homeroom ... Uhh, what was it again? Errr, I think I took down a memo, or maybe not ....."

"Please just get on with it already!"

Even though I was already annoyed this morning, just looking at this person make my negative feelings increase even further. The way he was spinning his red pen around make him look like a lazy elementary schooler.

"Uh~ Wait, wait, errr ... Oh! Right, right, we have to decide what we're doing for the School Culture Festival. So, what did you guys decide on in the end?"

"Ehh!? Sensei, when this was brought up the other day, didn't you say 'Isn't it fine even if we don't do anything'?!? We've never talked about it since, so how could we have decided on something!?"

I jumped up from my chair with a loud thump, but the teacher with the dead eyes didn't seem to give a rat's ass about it, or even bother to get up.

"Ah~ well, about that .... Last week, the principal asked me, 'What's Tateyama-sensei's class doing for the festival?' Of course I hadn't thought of anything, so for the time being, I just told him, 'We've prepared a 'Special Project' that will really wow everyone, so please look forward to it!'"

"Just how good were you trying to look in front of the principal!? What do you mean 'I just told him'!? What are we going to do!? We only have a week left ...!!"

I collapsed into my chair again and covered my face with my hand. I heard Haruka pipe up beside me with a silly suggestion, "Ah, then how about we do a target shooting booth?", when we didn't have anything prepared or even a budget to work with, making the feelings of hopelessness stir up even more.

Truthfully, I didn't care what happened to this teacher, but if our current no-plan act became so famous it was written about in the school paper as "Special Project" or something along those lines, it really would be hopeless then.

If it actually became like that, there would only be despair in the end, the abyss of darkness, and complete ruin .....

"Ahhhhhh .....!!"

Just imagining that horrifying future made me cry out without thinking. If I had a reliable classmate right now, perhaps I'd be able to make something out of this adversity. However, no matter how you thought it over, with the soaking-wet optimistic boy beside me, and the teacher that was THE Trash of Humanity, the three of us were greatly lacking in fighting strength.

If I could just think of a way out by myself ..... But even when I tried—perhaps because I always did nothing but play games, or perhaps because I wasn't fully awake, my brain wasn't functioning as well as I hoped it would.

Faced with this severe situation, and at wit's end with the helplessly miserable hand he'd been dealt, Tateyama-sensei looked over with an uncomfortable expression.

".... N-now, now, calm down, it's not like we're dead yet. In any case, you're free to use the space of this classroom, and I'll help out, too. So why don't we just come up with something?"

The latter half of Tateyama-sensei's .... No, he could no longer even be called "sensei"—of this *man's* statement, "I'll help out too", I had no confidence in whatsoever.

For me, things weren't ever so easy.

If, even without it becoming famous as a "Special Project", our act for the festival became something so shameful that various rumors cropped up, I probably wouldn't be able to have a decent school life my remaining two years here.

Haruka might not care much about this type of thing, but for me, it was kind of a big deal.

It was bad enough that my presence at school had become so instable, and I didn't want to stand out in a negative way even more than this.

However, I had a feeling that the part where Tateyama-sensei had said we could use this classroom was a leading factor to some kind of breakthrough. Although we were already tired of seeing this classroom, for visitors, there must be many rare things to discover. For example, if something labeled "\_\_\_ Experiment" was brought out, there wasn't one person that wouldn't feel excited.

".... At the very least, it'd be nice if we could come up with something interesting .... Wait, budget! Sensei, if I'm not wrong, each class was given a budget to work with, right!? How much did we get!?"

The moment I asked this, Tateyama-sensei visibly flinched, and at the same time, glanced at the supplies shelf behind us.

“Eh? What’re you looking—”

Not missing even a second, I followed Tateyama-sensei’s gaze, and mixed among lab supplies and chemical bottles was an eerie-looking fish specimen I remembered seeing somewhere before.

It was the rare oceanic fish specimen that he had been looking at the before in the course materials online store, while muttering, “This specimen is so cool .... But it’s so expensive .....”

“.... Huh? That’s odd. Sensei, wasn’t that specimen too expensive for you to buy?”

Although it’d become rather cool, I saw a considerable amount of sweat beading on Tateyama-sensei’s forehead.

Without meeting my questioning gaze, he simply looked down in silence, almost like a criminal in a detective manga that had just been convicted with solid evidence and was about to completely confess about his motives.

“.... Sensei .... you used .... our budget, didn’t you?”

“.... It’s .... It’s *that* guy’s fault ...!!”

With passionate bad acting, what Tateyama-sensei said defensively about how “the 40% OFF sale for the rare fish specimen (that guy) started just when the assigned budgets for each class were calculated,” sounded just like the unfound motive for the crime.

.... Although, it wasn’t even like a motive or anything.

Speaking as if he was a victim that had been captivated by the rare fish, I was already past anger or contempt, and was beginning to feel something similar to sympathy.

“So, what are we going to do? In my opinion, umm .... I think something like target shooting would be a good idea ....”

With Tateyama-sensei’s speech already shifted to the theme of “How captivating the rare fish was,” and while I was thinking of how to expose this teacher to the

principal, once again, Haruka pushed his opinion about wanting to do a target shooting booth.

“.... You know, for a target shooting booth, we’d need a lot of prizes, and it’s a lot to set up, so matter how you think about it, it’s impossible with just us. And for starters, thanks to this idiot of a teacher, we don’t even have any funds left.”

“Oh ... but I thought it was a good idea. I saw what all the other classes are doing, and no one seemed to be doing target shooting.”

Although Haruka said this very off-handedly, it came off sounding like something very surprising. The reason there wasn’t a “target shooting booth” among the other classes probably had to do with the budget. With how the school barely had enough for renovations, I couldn’t imagine that one class would be given even nearly enough to get together many prizes.

However, what mattered more was that Haruka, who was always spacing out with thoughts that I didn’t understand at all, was so concerned about what the other classes were doing for the Culture Festival to the point that he knew all about them.

“.... Could it be that you’re actually really looking forward to the Culture Festival?”

When I asked this, he answered bashfully, “Actually, yeah.” Seeing as how he hadn’t been shy at all about me seeing him half-naked earlier, it would seem that this guy felt embarrassment for different reasons than other people did.

“That’s kind of surprising .... But the other day, when we were talking about how we wouldn’t do anything for the festival, you didn’t even say a word ....”

“Well, that’s because, it’d be a bother if I suddenly collapsed, since my body’s weak; and when I was watching everyone, it seems like a lot of work to set things up, so I thought it couldn’t be helped ....”

Haruka said, and smiled meekly.

I didn’t understand it very well, but it seemed that Haruka had a serious “illness” that was beyond comparison with the “illness” that I had.

It was the type where a sudden attack could cause death.

Tateyama-sensei had told me about this when we'd first enrolled, but perhaps due to the actual person's optimistic personality, I'd never really realized the seriousness of it.

Because of his experiences up until now, he was probably more than a little aware of it himself.

Possibly, just because I hadn't really paid any attention until now, he'd been putting up with various burdens at school on his own since enrolling.

"I see. But, you want to do it, right?"

"..... Yeah. I want to. But I'll just end up causing trouble for you, Takane ...."

Although still being shy, Haruka said this clearly.

Even though we'd already been talking about it this much, I didn't understand why he was still acting so shy.

".... You know, how are you so okay with Sensei doing something like that? Anyway, if you want to do something, then just try doing it, and if it doesn't work out, then we'll think of what to do when that time comes."

"Well, that's true, but, I can't do it on my own .... And I've never really done this kind of thing before, so I don't know if it'll work out well ...."

Looking at Haruka who was muttering meekly while rolling the eraser on his desk around, for some reason, I leapt up from my seat, and without thinking, slammed my hands down on the desk.

"—Aaahhhh!! Just make up your mind already, geez!! You want to do target shooting, right!? Then it's decided!! I'll help out too, alright!? You got that!?"

After I'd yelled, Haruka mumbled, "Got it ...." with a frightened expression.

However, I didn't just leave it at then, and next shot at Tateyama-sensei, "Please prepare us money right this instant! Also, that specimen will be used as the prize! Understood!?"

"Ehh!? No, wait, there's no way we're doing that! How much do you think it cost—"

".... Principal."

“Alright, got it! We’ll do just as you said! Woah, I’m getting pumped now!”

Tateyama-sensei hastily said this with a refreshing smile. At this point, it wasn’t just me, but even Haruka, that was looking at him and his absurdity with a chilly stare.

— — Looking at the clock, it had already been more than half an hour since homeroom had started, and nearing the time that it should end.

In the one week before the Culture Festival, all the usual lessons were cancelled, and instead, each class was assigned to work on preparing their act for the festival, under supervision of the Executive Committee.

Every class had homeroom during the first hour, but starting from the second hour, all the students would begin the preparation work in their respective classrooms.

For Haruka and I, we’d been doing self-study, but since we’d just decided on what we were going to do, we had to start making progress on preparations, too.

“‘Target shooting’, huh ..... Where should we even start ...?”

Although I’d been all fired up a moment ago and said to Haruka, “Then let’s do it!”, the fact of the matter was that there was only a week left, and with just the two of us, would be even be able to finish the preparations for a “target shooting booth”?

There was the buying of prizes, the lining up of prizes, and along with the necessary work like preparing the cork gun, there was just no end to it.

We would need to use the engineering room or art room to make large props, but the room reservations had already been taken in advance by the other classes.

“U-um .... Since it seems like it’s impossible after all, why don’t we do something else?”

“No! If you say it’s impossible, then it really will be! You’re the one that said you wanted to do it, so help think of something!”

Haruka looked shocked again, and quickly crossed his arms and began thinking.

Although it was originally this guy’s idea, I’d gotten pretty into it, too, wanting to show everyone that “we’re different from those overly-cheery guys that do this just to get all friendly with each other.”

If we were going to do this, I didn't want to do it half-assed. My motivation built up from my daily online gaming would start being fired up here and now.

"At this point, it'll be too hard to make any kind of large-scale booth. Sensei, about DIY ...."

"Yeah! Never done it before in my life!"

"—That's what I thought. Which is why Haruka and I will have to do it by ourselves ...."

"O-oi, oi oi, just wait a minute! I've never done anything like DIY, but guess what? I'm pretty good at programming!"

Tateyama-sensei pointed his thumb confidentially at himself, and did that annoying thing that was common among otaku, as if saying, "I'm amazing in other areas, check me out!"

"Ahh ... Really? Wow~ Well, since you'll just get in the way, please go and make a dating sim ga—"



It had become a pain to deal with him, and just when I was brushing him off with that off-hand comment, something that I hadn't thought of before suddenly came to me.

We were in a situation where we weren't able to make any large props.

Our only prize was the rare fish specimen.

And our aim was to make the most interesting—"target shooting booth".

It was a gamble, but we might just be able to pull this off in a week.

When I realized this, once again, I jumped up from my seat with a loud thunk!

"Uwahr! Wait, h-hold on, Takane!! It's my fault for fooling around, but let's go about this calmly! Violence won't solve anything! There has to still be some other way ....!"

Surprised at my sudden movement, Tateyama-sensei had brought his hands up in front of him and was blurting out some speech that sounded like a cheap, desperate attempt at pleading for his life.

Besides me, Haruka, who must have been dozing off while pretending to be thinking, had been startled by me, and suddenly fell out of his chair and onto the floor with a loud clatter.

"I've just thought of something! The target shooting booth, we just might be able to pull it off!"

"Eh? Oh, right, target shooting. But even the preparations will be a lot of work, you know? I said it earlier, but I can't even build a bookshelf ...."

"Ah, we're not relying on that in the slightest anymore. What I mean is, you can do programming, right, Sensei ....!"

Not understanding the meaning behind my wide grin, Tateyama-sensei's face paled.

"D-did something happen, Takane ....?"

Haruka, who was sitting on the floor behind his chair, spoke to me with drool on his face, but I decided not to mention that.

“Fufufu .... We might just be able to pull off this target shooting thing. You’re good at drawing, right ....?”

“Eek ....!”

Although I was smiling, Haruka looked terrified, as if he’d just been threatened. Why were all the guys here so pathetic?

Well, it didn’t matter right now if they were pathetic.

.... Because I’d work them to the bone after this.

“O-oi, Takane ..... Could the ‘target shooting’ you’re talking about be ....”

Judging from his expression, it seemed that Tateyama-sensei had already figured out what I was thinking of.

At any rate, in order to make this “target shooting” a reality, it would be an incredibly heavy workload for him.

“Fufufu .... That’s right. Even without using a saw or any tools, we can actually make a ‘target shooting game’, right? Haruka can draw all the characters and backgrounds, and we can finish it with just one prize.”

Once I’d explained this, Tateyama-ensei’s shoulders slumped, and he sighed, “Just as I thought ....”

Making a game with one person would be considerably large workload.

However, up until now, he had done some incredibly terrible things. Taking that into account, he hadn’t been giving enough effort at all.

“Eh .... ? We’re making a game!? Starting now!?”

The easygoing Haruka seemed surprised at this, and was reacting more than he usually would. However, unlike Tateyama-sensei, his surprise stemmed more from trying to contain his excitement.

“That’s right! Haruka, you’ll be drawing everything for the game. You can do that, right?”

After I said this, Haruka nodded his head enthusiastically. The expression he had right now was brighter than I'd ever seen from him before, giving off a completely different impression than how he usually was.

"It'll be a lot of work, but do your best. Well, for the most part, Sensei will work something out for us."

"What!? Me!? Just how much work do you think it is to make a ga—"

"Principal ....."

"Let's do our very best and make something good!!"

With the most winning smile, Tateyama-sensei posed with his thumb again.

This "Principal" spell was incredibly useful.

There was no mistake that my future school life would be indebted to him.

"There's just one problem. What do you mean by 'Just one prize is enough'? As expected, we don't know how many people will be able to clear the game ... Are we making it so difficult that not even one person will be able to clear it? Won't that just drive everyone away?"

"Don't worry about that. For the game's format, please make it a 'point' system rather than a 'clear' system. Also, I want it to be made for 2 players."

"I can do that, but .... Wait, does this mean ....?"

"Right! I will be the opponent and compete for points with the challengers. If a girl like me is the opponent, all talk about the difficulty and so on will disappear, right?"

In a turn of events, Tateyama-sensei's pale expression from earlier now changed to one of defeat. It was the same face that I'd had on earlier. Serves him right.

"Takane's going to be the one fighting? But if you lose even once, then we won't have a prize after that."

"There won't be an after. Because I won't lose! It'll definitely be lively when I lose just once at the end of the Culture Festival, and I'll adjust myself accordingly when that time comes."

Hearing this, Haruka made an incredibly worried face. Well, he had every right to.

We didn't know what would happen with the game, and there was a slight chance that I might actually lose.

If I did end up losing, and our one prize, the "rare fish specimen (expensive)" was gone, that would mean the event would be over right then and there; it was quite a gamble.

However, I had a "special skill" that I hadn't told him about.

.... Well, to be exact, it was that I didn't want to talk about it, but because of it, I had confidence in this gamble. But I definitely did not want to talk about it —

"Ahh, Haruka, you know what? This kid's really famous online. You know that game there's commercials about on TV, right? The one where you shoot up zombies."

"Ah, I've heard about it. It's an online game, right ....? If I remember, there was a tournament for it a while back ...."

"Yeah, that's right, that's right. She ranked number two nationally in that tournament."

In the brief moment I had a mental monologue going on, Tateyama-sensei unbelievably came out about my secret.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!! Wh-wh-wh-why are you telling him!? N-n-no, that's not true ....!"

The hands-on zombie-killing online shooting game, "DEAD BULLET -1989-". Since services began about a year ago, it was now Japan's leading online FPS game due to the widespread response from its users. And in this game, I was a heavy player that had become a top ranker just four hours after the game opened.

Although I played with an original style since the game first began, and had become so famous that a fan community with several hundred members had been created, partly due to my small circle of friends, Tateyama-sensei was the only that knew about it.

— — That was, until just a moment ago.

I'd been so naïve. While searching for a friend in the real world I could share the same game with, I'd been lured in by this teacher I could talk with casually with, but I had made a huge mistake.

It was concerning that a female high school girl would cast away all other entertainment for a grotesque massacre game. This was “DEAD BULLET -1989-”.

To be honest, if I knew a female classmate of mine was so addicted, it was at a level where I'd be pretty taken aback myself.

If it were to ever be found out by a classmate ....

“Takane, that's amazing! Number two nationally!? That's so cool! Why didn't you say anything until now? Hey, is it fun?”

Completely oblivious to the conflict I was having in my head, Haruka's reaction was much more accepting than I had expected, and was actually very positive, as if he wanted to know more.

No, this had to be because he didn't understand the true nature of the game. Once he did, he would be sure to say something like, “Uwah lol Even though you're a girl, you like this kind of gory game? That's scary lolol Stay away from me lololol”.

Just as I stared back in Haruka's innocent eyes, Tateyama-sensei suddenly burst out laughing and said something totally ridiculous.

“Isn't this great, Takane? You were looking for a friend to play together with, weren't you? That game doesn't really suit me, so why not invite Haruka?”

“What!? Wh-what are you even saying!? It's not like I even play that much ....”

No, that was a lie; I played. Although I would have gone to bed early due to my drowsiness, instead I'd spent all my time playing from the time I got home at four in the afternoon until four in the morning.

And Tateyama-sensei, who was grinning in front of me, knew all about this, of course.

“Oh~ But I thought you were pretty into it ... What was your name there, again? ‘LightingDancer .....’”

“Gyaaaaaaah!! Ahhhhh!! I'm going to do it! I'll tell the principal! About everything!! Is that okay!?”

“Ahhhhhh!? Anything but that!! Alright, already!! I'm sorry!!”

From an outsider's perspective, the way Tateyama-sensei and I were yelling at each other while shaking the desks probably seemed very comical.

However, from the perspective of those in question, this was a battle of life and death.

As we continued to glare at each other for several seconds, right when Haruka started to mutter, “J-just calm down ....”, the bell rang, as if to put an end to this stalemate.

“.... Haah. A-anyway, I’m sure there’s no objections to both of us keeping our mouths shut.”

“Yes, that sounds agreeable .... You understand, right? If you let anything else leak ....”

“You’re one to talk. If you tell the principal—You know what’ll happen, don’t you ....?”

“.... I understand. I’ll keep this time’s incident to myself .... However, if this continues any further, I won’t allow it .....”

With a bargain that didn’t seem at all like a conversation between a teacher and a student, almost as if saying, “Today, we’re leaving it at that!”, the first hour homeroom ended.

“Now then .... Well, I have responsibilities too, so I guess I’ll try testing out some things .... We’ll meet back here again during the next hour. Go take a bathroom break or something~”

Tateyama-sensei said, and with his attendance book in hand, he left the classroom while scratching his head. In the brief moment the door opened, we could hear the footsteps of other students and their cheerful voices as they talked.

“Haah .... I wonder if it’ll work out ....”

Worn out, I let my head fall down on the desk, and when I did, my eyes met with Haruka, who was sitting beside me.

“... Honestly, I kind of just blurted it out without thinking, but thanks to Takane, I think it’ll be really fun ....! I’m sure it’ll work out! I’ll do my best, too!”

When I looked at Haruka, who was smiling and striking a small, confident pose, I felt my cheeks grow hotter for some reason .... It was probably because I was embarrassed about the thing with the online game being exposed.

— —I found myself smiling a little, too.

I realized that somewhere down the line, I, too, had become “the type of girl that works hard for the School Culture Festival”. Surely, this smile could be nothing other than a forced one.

“.... Surprisingly, this actually isn’t so boring.”

Muttering this, I began fantasizing in my head about the pleasantly enjoyable preparation plans for the Culture Festival.

## **Headphone Actor II**

In my life up until now, had the scenery ever danced so violently?  
With my every step, the traffic lights seemed to jump, and the buildings swayed unstably.  
With every new breath I took, my body was whipped by the wind.

The intersection was crowded with people.  
Furthermore, without any regard to the rules or meaning of traffic lights and signs, a multitude of cars were abandoned in a cluttered mess in the streets.

A person shouting something.  
A person hitting someone.

Everyone had the same pale face, lamenting the end of the world.  
For a split-second, I heard a baby crying and felt like stopping.

“You can’t. It’s going to be over in 12 minutes, so you can’t turn back now ... Come on, keep

going left at the next traffic light.”

The voice from the headphones, in contrast to the outside world, was quiet, and continued to simply show me the route in a straightforward manner.

Doing as told, I weaved my way through waves of people.

Up until now, how many times had I ever run with all my strength?

Since I was young, I was overly-protected, and wasn’t allowed to run around outside.

This was because I had a disease where I would lose consciousness for no reason at unpredicted times.

This disease wasn’t something that happened often.

Simply, I wouldn’t remember what happened the moment I collapsed.

The only part that I could remember was what happened after I opened my eyes.

It was almost like after having a long dream, with the memories from before I collapsed being a blur.

Going through the crowds of people, and narrow streets, I rushed out into the big street.

“Turn right here! There’s only one minute left .....!”

The voice from the headphone started to gradually become impatient.

Without concern to the pain in my legs, in the long moment where I turned right with the momentum, I heard something like the sound of an iron mass vigorously collapsing.

Followed by the screaming, I couldn’t resist the urge to turn around.

“.... Hurry up! There’s someone that you have to meet, isn’t there?! So that’s why ...”

Increasing my breathing, and with the sensation that my lungs were burning out, my consciousness began to dim.

I wondered if I would faint again.

Now that I thought about it, when was the last time that I had ever lost consciousness?

..... I couldn’t remember anything.

I couldn’t even remember how things had come to this, or even who I was going to meet ....

Despite this, I had the feeling that there was something very important ahead.

With that feeling, I simply went forward by putting one foot in front of the other.

—Facing forward, the hill that I was heading towards had already come into view before my eyes.

## Yuukei Yesterday II

“Amazing .... She’s already taken down thirty-seven people ....”

“Actually, I heard that she’s that veteran player that ranked no.2 in the nationals in ‘DEAD BULLET-1989-’”

“...!! Isn’t that ‘LightningDancerEne’!? No wonder her moves are so good. Hey, look, it’s another new high score! .... But why is she crying?”

Right now, the Science Preparation Room was the most fired up it had been since its opening.

Without bothering to wipe the tears flowing from my eyes, I desperately gripped the controller.

No matter how painful it was, once I took hold of the controller, there was no way that I could allow myself to lose.

Due to my daily habits and the personality that I had, it was something I no longer had any influence over.

On the large monitor, a hand holding a gun was displayed, and as it matched the movements of my controller and aligned to the left and to the right, I shot down the targets.

Every time they were shot, there was a “Gyaaaaah!” scream, and incredibly grotesque scenes were shown on the monitor, with emphasis on the blood and guts, despite the fact that they were cute-looking characters that resembled bears and rabbits.

“You did it, Takane! You won *again*!! No, wait ... Should I be calling you Ene right now, instead!?”

Haruka was squatting beside my side of the player seats, speaking to me with sparkling eyes, almost as if he were my coach.

“Shut .... Shut .... up ..... idiottt .....”

Although I was already crying to the point that I could no longer speak properly, all around, the audience was showering me in generous applause over my victory.

The challenger that had been my opponent, wearing military-style clothes, passionately saluted me and said, "Excuse me, but I never would have thought I'd have the pleasure of playing against the great LightningDancerEne-sama in a place like this ....!! It's such an honor!!"

Near the entrance, there were several robust-looking guys that were fighting over who would be the next challenger, going, "I'll be the one to challenge ...." "No, no, I'll be the one to ...."

With the increasing number of students that were gathering to this unusual scene, and the game players that had rushed over after hearing the rumors, it had transformed into a living hell.

"How did it come to thiiiiis ....."

My vision became blurred from the tears that continued to fall on top of the controller.

\*

The day of the School Culture Festival. The beginning of this incident started about several hours ago.

The study desks and teacher's desk that were usually in the center of the Science Preparation Room were taken away, and in its place, a shooting game booth had been magnificently set up.

Honestly, though, it wasn't anything extraordinary; it was just a long table that had a cloth draped over it, with pictures drawn in fluorescent paint, and the display screen placed on top. However, the windows had been covered up with cardboard, making the only source of light the light coming from the display and the faint glow of the fluorescent paint.

It was thanks to Haruka's drawing ability too, of course, but if it was like this, it wouldn't be apparent how much of a rushed job this was.

"I-it's almost time, huh .... It feels like some kind of dream; to think that we'd really be able to finish ....!"

“Yeah, it turned out pretty well in the end ....! Good work, Haruka! Now then, let me try it out a little more before we actually open.”

Haruka, who had been making this demanding game until yesterday and had bags under his eyes, for once; and in contrast, I, who had gotten a sufficient amount of sleep (fifteen hours) and didn't have bags under my eyes, for once; began working on the final adjustments before releasing it to the public.

Once Haruka turned on the power for the computer that was placed underneath the table, the display monitor showed the title screen of the completed game that Tateyama-sensei and Haruka had created.

One after another, there appeared stuffed animal monsters that were to be shot down in this game, which Haruka had given the name, “Headphone Actor”.

At first, I didn't understand the meaning of the game's title, but when I saw how the “boss that controls the stuffed animals” that comes out in the last stage looked just like me, I understood with considerable annoyance that it meant to “defeat the stuffed animals (actors) that are being controlled by me, who is wearing headphones”.

Of course, it goes without saying that I sent Haruka flying after that.

“.... This game really leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Why should I have to fight against myself?”

“Well, see, the challengers are going to have to try and defeat you, right? So that's why I thought, maybe it'd be best if I made the enemy look like Takane~ .... Although, I completely forgot that Takane was going to be playing, too.”

“.... How could you have forgotten something like that? .... Well, after the colors have been changed and all, it doesn't really look like me anymore, though.”

Originally, the last boss, “Takane No.2 (dubbed by Tateyama-sensei)” had black hair just like me, but after being forced to recolor, it was now a 2P design with bright blue hair.

“Well, even if I eventually forgive you for this design, why is it so gory? Is this much even necessary?”

After clicking start from the title screen, a monologue would begin. The game's stage was a small town, and once again, by Haruka's own decision, it was modeled to greatly resemble the town that we lived in.

As you advanced with a gun in hand, cute stuffed animals of various sizes would come lunging out at you, one after another. Every time you shot one down, the screen would become dyed in blood with a graphic “splat!” sound, leaving the player to be hit with an enormous feeling of guilt.

“Ah, about that, I referenced the game that you mentioned before! Since I thought you’d like this kind of thing.”

The moment I heard that, my hand slipped on the controller, and after being bitten by a monkey doll, I got game over.

Blood dripped down from the top of the screen, followed by the words “GAME OVER” being displayed.

“D-did you ask Sensei about that!?”

After pulling all-nighters every day in order to work on the game, it seemed that once it had been completed, Tateyama-sensei had collapsed on the bed after rasping out the words, “Please .... appeal .... to the principal .....”

Since Haruka had been staying over at Tateyama-sensei’s house all week to make the game, there was a high possibility that he’d been told all sorts of unnecessary things.

“No, he didn’t tell me anything at all. I remembered you talking about this before, so I looked it up by myself.”

“Wh-what, really? Well, that’s good, then .... Anyway, I honestly think this effect is way too mismatched. It doesn’t make me feel excited at all.”

I started the game from the title screen again, but no matter what, it really was weird seeing the stuffed animals be scattered into a bunch of blood and guts when they were shot down. It would’ve been better if it was zombies that attacked you, instead.

“Ahaha, sorry. But, since we were going through with this anyway, I wanted to make it something that you’d like, Takane ....”

Caught off by what he said once more, my hand slipped again and this time, I got a game over from being suddenly attacked by a pig doll.

“I-it’s not like I really like gore or anything ....!”

I muttered while restarting the game, not even daring to look at Haruka.

“Eh!? Wah, sorry, sorry, I thought you’d like seeing the blood and all that .... But when I think about it, there’s no way that you’d like this kind of thing, huh.”

“Haah ... You’ve really misunderstood big time. Listen up. How good a game is depends on how exciting it is. People play because they want to be cool like the main character and have the kind of life that they do.”

Even if it was subtle, that was the charm I looked for in games.

No matter who they are in real life, anyone could become a hero in a video game.

That was the number one reason I liked games so much.

“Oh~ I get it now. I don’t usually play games at all, so I had no idea. Ah, then ... maybe ... this game isn’t that fun, then?”

Haruka asked this very, very slowly.

Without taking my eyes away from the screen and after I shot down a cat doll with a headshot, I answered, “Well, I actually kind of like it, though.”

Beside me, I heard a sigh of relief.

While playing this game mercilessly yesterday, I was able to get pretty decent scores already after just a few minutes.

Other than when I’d gotten game overs due to Haruka’s disruptions, I hadn’t made any mistakes at all. If it was like this, there was no way that I would lose when playing against someone else.

Beating the creator, Tateyama-sensei’s best score of “45000 points” by more than tripling it also served as one reason I was so confident.

“It’ll be alright for sure! If it’s Takane, no matter who the challenger is, they have no chance of winning!”

“Isn’t it obvious? I have confidence in my arms, if nothing else ..... Wait, it’s already this late!? The festival’s going to start in just five minutes! Haruka, how are the other preparations!?”

“Ah, y-yeah, they’re all ready! I set up everything yesterday so that we’d be good to go anytime! Ah, but, I’m starting to get nervous ....”

Although Haruka had been relaxed as always up until now, with the start of the Culture Festival quickly approaching, he stood up from his chair and started pacing around the classroom anxiously.

“Wh-what are you so nervous about!? I definitely won’t lose, so don’t worry about it!”

“W-well, yeah, that’s true, but ... I wonder if everyone will enjoy it ... What’ll I do if people say it’s not fun at all ...?”

Since we were right before the opening, I also was starting to feel nervous. Come to think of it, when I’d gone to the tournament a few days ago, I remembered feeling something similar to this.

However, this time, it wasn’t about, “scoring a good performance,” but “how to let the customers have fun” that was the critical issue.

From children to the elderly .... Well, with a game like this, there was an age limit to some extent, but as much as possible, we had to let everyone have fun without discriminating.

While it was true that this game that Tateyama-sensei and Haruka made still needed work on parts of the balance and system, I honestly thought it was interesting and fun.

My job was to show the charm of this to everyone, and try to play in a way they would allow them to have fun, all while smiling as much as possible.

“It’ll be just fine. Since we did our best to make it, everyone will enjoy it for sure!”

The moment I said this to the worrying and anxious Haruka, an announcement sounded from the speaker installed by the clock: “The Culture Festival will be beginning shortly. Each class should follow the instructions of the Executive Committee. Let’s make this an enjoyable event!”

The moment I heard this, my heart started pounding from nervousness.

Haruka had crouched down, and started to chant under his breath, “It’ll be okay, it’ll be okay ....”

“Wait, hold on, it’s already starting! People are gonna come soon, so, umm ... Stand outside the classroom and be the guide! If there’s people that look interested, make sure you explain everything properly and let them in!! Understand!?”

“Ah, ahh, yeah, yeah! .... G-got it ... It’s okay, it’s okay ....”

With that, Haruka stood up quickly and stumbled towards the door.

And just as he was doing so, he crashed into the door once, and left the classroom while going, “Awawa ....”

“.... Is that guy really gonna be okay?”

Background music for the Culture Festival had started playing from the same speakers as earlier, announcing the start of the festival.

For the booth’s effect, I turned off the speakers, as well as the lights, and waited for the first challenger that Haruka would bring in.

With the lights off, the room was bathed in the glow from the display screen and the pale light of the fluorescent paint.

Of the two chairs set up in front of the long table, I sat down in the one on the right side, and spaced out staring at the monitor that continued to display the title screen.

In the screen where “Headphone Actor” was displayed, behind the title logo was a gray cityscape, and because it was set in the evening, the gaps between the groups of buildings showed a dark, violet sky.

“Anyway, this really is a game with some bad taste ..... Sensei and Haruka just went ahead and made it on their own whims, but if it’s a girl that plays this, she’ll probably get freaked out.”

But if it was Haruka, he probably wouldn’t pay attention to that at all, and if there was a girl that seemed interested, he’d just cheerfully lead her inside like I’d told him to.

—No, this could potentially be very bad. What would we do if the one lead inside happened to be pretty faint-hearted?

The moment they opened the door, what would jump out at them would be the extremely brutal shooting game set up in the dismal Science Preparation Room.

And the challenger they were up against would be me, gloomy and with unpleasant eyes, standing in this dark room .... No, I should stop thinking about myself. Honestly, I’d get depressed, and that was no improvement. I’d end up crying.

But even excluding me as the factor, as expected, it really was a game that would be a little rough for girls or kids.

I'd have to take caution and make sure that Haruka explained that part clearly.

The moment I stood up from the chair with a sinking feeling, the door opened.

Suddenly seeing light for the first time in several minutes, my eyes were momentarily blinded, and all I could see of the customer was their silhouette. I panicked a little, but judging by their height, it seemed to be a male adult.

It was rude to stay silent, so I started with the explanation that I had thought up.

"Ah, w-welcome! Our class is doing a shooting game! If you're able to win in a challenge against me, then this fabulous prize —"

"I was wondering who I'd be up against, and turns out it's just a girl. Even though that guy standing in front of the door looked easy enough to beat."

As I was giving a cheerful and cute explanation with my best smile, the man smacked it down with those words.

For a moment, I was frozen without really understanding what had happened exactly due to the abruptness of his words, but I gradually came to realize the aggressive attitude that he was giving off.

"Eh .... Ah, um ....."

Due to this being the worst first contact and also because I wasn't accustomed to socializing in my first place, my heart started throbbing at once, and my hands naturally started shaking. The speech that I had already thought up went completely blank, and even when I thought I'd still be able to talk, my mouth could only let out vague noises.

"Sorry to say, but it's your unlucky day, girly. We came because it was our friend's Culture Festival, and turns out there's this fun-looking booth. He's really good at shooting games, y'know, so we'll be taking off your prizes, alright?"

As my eyes gradually got used to the light, I saw that behind the man that had entered first, was another, giddy-looking man. It would seem that these two were a pair.

"U-um, I'll be doing my best as your opponent, so ..."

Even as I felt sweat running down my back, I tried to keep calm, and continued with a smile on my face.

From the minute they'd started talking, I already knew that they were some malicious customers, but that still didn't change the fact that they were the first.

I wondered if they planned wreck havoc for booths during the festival just for the heck of it. I couldn't read the expression of the able-looking man with the sunglasses, but I could feel a devious attitude from the man behind him.

"Well, whatever. A homemade game is probably going to be shitty, anyway. Just child's play, in the end. Although I feel bad about taking away the prize so early on, don't lose hope, and think of this as lesson for growing up."

As the man said this, he passed by me and dropped himself down in the challenger seat.

"It's really too bad for you, since he doesn't go easy or anything. Girly, you may not know this, but, he made it to the semifinals in the tournament for a game called "DEAD BULLET-1989-". He's also participated in a number of other tournaments, so if it's you, girly, there's nothing that you can—"

Speaking up until this point, he stopped his annoying rambling with a small scream.

That might have been because I'd stopped smiling to glare at him, or because he'd bit his tongue from rambling too much.

"Ta-Takaneeee ...."

Suddenly, I heard a familiar, miserable-sounding voice. From the other side of the door, Haruka was looking this way with tear-filled eyes, and judging by his frightened expression, he'd probably been intimidated by these men.

With a hand gesture, I signaled for him to close the door. Haruka hesitated for a moment, but after managing a quiet, "Good luck ....!" he slowly closed the door.

Making sure that he had, I was once again in the darkened room, and walked towards where the booth was set up.

Sitting down in the chair beside the one the sullen-looking man, I faced the display with the title screen and once more, started to explain.

“Allow me to explain the rules one last time. This is a shooting game with a point system. The one that takes down the most targets will be the winner. There are different levels of difficult, so which level would you prefer?”

“The hardest one, obviously.”

“Understood.”

Pressing the select button on the title screen, I set the difficulty to “extra”.

This level was one that Tateyama-sensei had said was so difficult, that “if someone’s able to get a perfect score with this, they’re a monster.”

“Oi oi, wait a minute, girly. I’m sure you already know, but no cheating, got it?”

Before I’d even noticed, the gaudy-looking man had stood behind the sullen man, and said this in a slighter more threatening tone than earlier.

Certainly, that was something to be worried about. There was a possibility that they’d think we would change the difficulty for only our side of the stage, and furthermore, cheat with the points.

“Of course we wouldn’t rely on anything like that. Therefore, would you like to switch places with me? As it’s a point system, this way, there will be no complaints about who the winner is.”

As I said this, the sullen simply said, “I don’t care either way. Just hurry up and start,” and took off his sunglasses.

“... Let’s begin, then. May the best shot win.”

I tightened my grip on the controller once, loosened it .... then gripped it again. Once I was sure that I was feeling absolute confidence, I clicked the start button for the game.

As the monster enemies flooded out, for a moment, the top of the screen was filled with them. The time limit for battle mode was two minutes. In that time, the one that takes down the most enemies is the winner.

There were only two differences from single mode: even if you get hit by an enemy, you won’t be get game over, and instead become unable to move for a certain period of time; and if you’re able to destroy the bonus items, you can obstruct your opponents view with blood splatters

Other than that, there was nothing else different; it was a simple game where you simply take down the monsters that appear, but that's exactly what allowed a player's true ability to show itself.

Yes, there was nothing "shitty" about this game at all.

I had to completely wipe out this man who had looked down on this game, no matter what.

It had been one minute and thirty seconds since the game began. The point difference between me and my challenger was already so wide that he had no chance of recovering no matter how hard he struggled.

With my eyes focused on the screen, I couldn't confirm his expression, but with his bluffs gone to this extent, he was in this miserable state. It was a rough guess.

Very calmly, I faced the enemies that appeared before me, and without destroying a single item to obstruct my opponent, I simply continued to shoot at the enemies.

The game buzzer sounded at the end of the game, and the screen showing the results pulled up.

However, perhaps because he already knew that he had lost, the sullen man stared dumbfounded at his controller. The man behind him, too, merely stood with his mouth agape.

It was obvious. To be able to continue shooting at that number of enemies without faltering didn't have to do with the specifications of the game or whatever, but simply, the ability of the player.

After all, I had even dared to let go of the controller once and let the enemies attack me, so there was no room to make any complaints after that kind of performance.

"And that's a match. Thank you so much for playing. As the rules don't allow consecutive plays,

please come back after thirty minutes if you'd like to attempt another challenge."

Even as I told him this with a smile, the sullen man was still mumbling the all-too-expected loser speech of, "This can't be .... How could I have ...."

"Um ... the exit is ...."

Just as I was trying to coax him into leaving, he stood up and faced me, raising his voice to a shout.

“J-just who are you!? I’ve never seen such an amazing player before! Just who ...!!”

Listening to him say such overrated things had, honestly, become an annoyance.

I tried to pull him along as quickly as I could while telling a fitting lie, “I just practiced a lot ....”

However, the screen showing the results was too bright, and after he looked at my illuminated face and moved back, I realized that I had made a big mistake.

Earlier, the gaudy man had talked about the semifinals for the “DEAD BULLET-1989-” tournament.

With it being a nationwide event, it had been a pretty big turnout, and there was no mistake that it’d been rather packed with players.

From watching me play, it wouldn’t be a lie to say that I was fairly skilled. But, right now, I wanted that to be a lie.

“C-could be you .... LightningDancerEne-san!?”

— Things had taken a turn for the worst. If he was a contestant from the semifinals, and furthermore, from this district, there was no doubt that we had crossed paths at the tournament hall.

And what’s more, I had lost the mask I’d prepared for that day, and played with my face completely exposed.

In the semifinals, I had pulled off such a strong performance that it’d been called the “Dancer Legend” afterwards, gotten first place by a wide margin, and stood out to the point of being abnormal.

I was relieved that there hadn’t been a relay broadcast of those painful semifinals on television, but to think that I’d come across this kind of situation in a place like this .....

Since I’d been annoyed with these guys earlier, I had purposely put on a show to look cool, but with this sudden turn of events, my mind went blank again.

“Eh? W-wait, what, is this kid famous or something!?”

“Idiot, she’s not just famous ....! She’s achieved legendary scores at many tournaments, and the group that she’s the leader of, ‘Lightning Rondo –Eternal Rondo–’ even ranks in the top 3 in team competitions—”

“Gyaaaaaah!! You’ve got the wrong person!! That’s enough, please!! Please, just hurry up and make your way out!!!”

With the information concerning the secret I wanted to hide most of all being blurted out right now, quite simply, all reason had flown out the window.

“Ackk!! A-and what’s more, that play style from earlier is, without a doubt, Ene-san’s speciality, ‘Phantom Waltz –Holy Nightmare–’ ....!”

With a sensation like my internal organs were tightening, it felt like my face might start spewing magma.

I wanted to put these two in a drum can right this instant, and bury them deep in the mountains somewhere.

“I-I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong person!! Ah, ah, please hurry up and get out!! I’m begging youuuuu!!”

Perhaps because there’d been too much of an uproar, the moment I threw open the door, Haruka burst into the room looking worried.

“T-Takane! Are you ok—!?”

“Gyaaaahh! You, too, *get out*!! Everyone just GET OUT—!!”

I pointed at the door and screamed. Haruka included, all three of them replied, “Y-yes, ma’m!” and rushed out of the room.

I sat back down in my chair, shoulders slumping heavily.

I’d made an outrageous miscalculation. To think that my identity would be exposed like this ....

There was a chance that the sullen man would come back later with some kind of message like, “I’m very sorry for my rude behavior earlier. It was such an honor to be able to compete against you ....”

No, he would definitely would. It was probably wise to not log in for a few days.

—But then there was Haruka. It was possible that he hadn’t heard the conversation from earlier, but if he had .... I felt nauseous just thinking about it.

Truthfully, I was aware of it myself how embarrassing the account name was, which I'd made on an impulse, along with the "cryptically redundant circle" that I'd made on an even stranger impulse.

Furthermore, to think that even the play style name that everyone had secretly started using would be exposed—

"I have no choice but to delete my account and die ...."

Tears of shame began spilling from my eyes.

As expected of Haruka, if he found out that I was suffering from this degree of chuunibyou, despite how much I usually berated him for being an idiot, he would probably be put off by it.

Our friendship up until now would be broken, a distance would be placed between us, and finally, he would say, "Ah, Enomoto-san, good morning ....." This was certain.

It was no use anymore. This was the worst.

In the first place, why had a junkie that often competes in tournaments come to this school at this kind of timing? I had the worst luck.

Anyway, assuming that Haruka had indeed heard everything earlier, I had to think of an excuse to cover it up as best as I could.

However, surely, if he had only heard it by chance, he wouldn't be able to fully understand without knowing the context or what those names even meant.

No, I was sure of that.

There was no mistake.

It would be alright.

"Takane, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just fine ... Wait—uwaaaaaaaah!! S-since when have you been ...!?"

Because I'd been so concentrated on my own inner conflicts, I hadn't even noticed that Haruka was suddenly right beside me ....

"Eh? Since when ....? Around when you said, 'I have no choice but to delete my account and die.'"

I could feel my face heat up in an instant. He'd even heard me talking to myself.

Including that embarrassing part where I'd been worried about my account .....

"Y-you're wrong! When I said account, I meant— Well, you know, it's pretty popular, right? The kind you use to chat with your friends ...."

Just what exactly was "wrong," anyway? Even though Haruka hadn't actually heard anything, it was definitely suspicious of me to be frantically making of excuses while avoiding eye contact. Better yet, I genuinely thought that somehow should just bury me in the mountains somewhere already.

However, becoming curious of his expression, I slowly lifted my face, and saw that, for some reason, Haruka's eyes were ablaze with brightly burning flames.

"It was amazing, Takane! I thought that customer earlier was a really scary person at first, but after playing the game with you, he came back and was really nice to me, too! He even said that the game was *really* fun! This has to be that kind of thing, right? Where after the match, everyone becomes friends with each other!"

Haruka suddenly started talking with passion.

His frightened tone from earlier had completed changed to a spirited one of newly-awakened sportsmanship.

I didn't really care about Haruka's sudden transformation, but the fact that he hadn't mentioned anything directly about me brought me a sense of relief.

As I thought, he hadn't heard anything. If I really stopped to think about it, there was no way that this guy had such good hearing. I'd worried over nothing.

"Oh? Those two really said something like that, huh. Then, taking this as a learning experience, there probably won't be any more problems. Well, if you leave it in my hands, something like this is an easy win!"

"Yeah! I was kind of worried, but it's really fun! It's all thanks to you, Takane!"

That's right. It's true that it'd been an irregularity, but in the end, we were able to ensure that the first customer had fun.

Also, if I had been able to win that easily even against that level of an opponent, as long as the nationwide number one player veteran didn't come, we most likely wouldn't be losing our prize.

Looking at these results, we were off to a very good start. If those two had already left, then there was no longer any reason for concern.

With where the Science Preparation Room was located, it probably wouldn't be as crowded compared to other booths; it wouldn't be a bad idea to let loose a bit while waiting for more customers.

With my throat completely dry from the built-up anxiety, I decided to take a drink from the sports drink I'd placed under the desk, as if to drink to my victory.

"Takane, you're amazing ....! And so cool! LightingDancerEne!? I'd love to see that 'Phantom Waltz -Holy Nightmare-' technique for myself, too!"

Instead of flowing down into my stomach, the sports drink in my mouth was instead spit out in midair.

What remained in my mouth entered my trachea splendidly, causing me to cough violently.

"Uwaaaah!! What happened all of a sudden, Takane!? A-are you okay!?"

Haruka was helping me by rubbing my back, but if possible, I wanted to disappear from this place already.

With my skirt soaking wet from the spilled sports drink, and how violently I was coughing, all my thoughts were gradually disappearing.

Rather, I wanted to die, right here and now.

"Uuu ... Haa .... Haa ... How do you know ... that ....."

Regaining my breath somewhat, I asked this question while wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. But perhaps it was already too late to ask. After all, he'd just said my handle name and special move without a single stutter.

"Ah, that customer earlier was really excited about talking about you, Takane. And I was happy to hear about a lot of stuff, too!"

"Ah, ahh, ahhhh ....."

Unable to even wipe the sports drink off my skirt, I could only moan with my head drooped down. It was over.

Farewell, my school life. The Culture Festival had been pretty fun, but honestly, it was already becoming a memory that I'd rather forget.

"Eh? Eh? Why do you seem so depressed about it? You're amazing, you know! You're famous and you have a lot of fans, right!? It's like you've suddenly become someone I hardly know anymore~"

Haruka had started rubbing my back again, but the words "somehow I hardly know anymore" stabbed mercilessly into my heart.

That's right. Thinking about it sensibly, I was a far cry from a normal girl. If shopping was my hobby, that would still be normal. And if club activities were my hobby, I'd probably be seen as an active and lovely girl.

However, even I couldn't find the charm in a girl that was a heavy player in a zombie-slaughtering game.

It was only because Haruka was misunderstanding the situation that he could say these things. If he actually knew about my usual routine, that would make him back off for sure.

That, in itself, might make him want to stop being friends with me; just thinking about it scared me.

"Muu ... Takane, I may not understand why you're so worried, but It's not like I'll hate you or anything, no matter how much you change. So don't be so down about it. Oh, right! Will you teach me how to play next time? Let's play it together! .... Hey, are you listening?"

Haruka said this while still rubbing my back.

Whether this guy realized it or not, the fact that he could so casually say these embarrassing things was what bothered me. He was probably like this with everyone. Maybe he was just straightforward, maybe just pure and innocent, but he was simple.

But, that was exactly why what he'd said about not hating me sounded so relieving.

Thinking about it like this, I was pretty simple, too.

Without really understanding if it was from embarrassment or happiness, I felt like crying, unable to bring myself to respond or even face Haruka.

“Excuse me~! We’d like to try playing~”

Suddenly, I heard a voice that sounded like a customer from beyond the door. Of course, the Culture Festival had just started. This wasn’t the time to be spacing out.

As I wiped away my tears in a hurry and went to get the door, I realized that my skirt was still soaking wet.

“Uuu .... Ahh .....

Stuck in a stance that was like a standing start pose for a track event, Haruka rushed past me to open the door and went out.

Even though he would usually react slowly all the time, it was only in times like these that he was surprisingly attentive.

Pulling out several tissues from the box on the shelf, I quickly wiped down my skirt, as well as the floor.

It wasn’t a lot since it’d only been what had been in my mouth, so I finished wiping up the sports drink in a few seconds.

Balling up the used tissues, I threw them into the trash can in the back of the room and headed for the door as if nothing had happened.

I opened the door a little, and gave Haruka a look to signal that everything was fine now. In front of the door stood the owner of the voice from earlier: a boy that looked to be in his second year in middle school.

“Ah, is it okay now? It looks like he wants to try, so I leave it to you to make it another heated match!”

Haruka said this with flames burning in his eyes again. It wasn’t like this was a sports competition or anything, but putting it into perspective as enjoying it as a game together, and both aiming for the best, it was true that there was something like a sportsman mentality.

“Surprisingly, this guy actually gets it,” I thought happily as I, too, faced the next match with a fired-up fighting spirit.

“Ah, is Onee-san going to be one I’ll challenge? I look forward to playing against you.”

The challenger, a brunette boy wearing a black parka, flashed a casual smile that seemed to hint at something else, and bowed his head.

“Ah, yes, I look forward to playing with you, too! I’ll be explaining the rules then, so please come on in!”

Opening the door wide, the boy came in while commenting, “So cool~”

“I-I’ll do my best, then.”

I said to Haruka, who was still all fired-up, and closed the door.

“Umm, I will now explain the rules! In a moment, you’ll be challenging me in the game that’s there in the center. The one that takes down the most enemies is the winner! Simple, right?”

I tried to give a big sister-like explanation with a desperately forced smile.

This time, the customer seemed quite normal. No, it was probably only because the first customer had been too much of a different species that made me think this ....

“Ohh~ Seems like fun! Even though they don’t seem to be here .... How about it? Do you want to try, Kido?”

“Doesn’t it? ..... Hm? Kido? Who—eeek!!”

Although the boy had been facing me and grinning while listening to my explanation, he suddenly started talking to the empty space beside him.

For a second, I didn’t understand what he was doing, but the moment I looked where he was looking, an unbelievable sight jumped out at me.

Up until a moment ago, I was sure that there had only been that one boy.

But now, standing beside him was hooded girl of about the same height.

It was dark, so I couldn’t see her expression very well, but the voice that muttered, “Yeah,” was definitely a girl’s.

“Ah, wh-wh-wh-what ....”

I was so shocked that I could barely keep standing. I was so certain that this girl had not been here when we'd talked in the hallway earlier, or even when he'd been let into the classroom.



There hadn't been any opportunity to enter the room in the one second that the door had been open. If I thought about it, she must have come in together with the boy, but .... I couldn't get away from the feeling that she had just suddenly appeared.

"Onee-san, are you okay? Ah, if it's her you're wondering about, she's been here the whole time. She kind of has a weak presence, so people often don't notice her .... — Ouch!!"

The girl seemed to take offense to being called a "weak presence," and hit the boy in the ribs.

But even if she did have a weak presence, was it really so weak that she'd go completely unnoticed like this?

—Could she possibly be some kind of ghost? This thought crossed my mind, but that was completely unrealistic. For someone like me, who had absolutely no belief in extreme supernatural things like the cognitive body of a ghost, it definitely made more sense that she was "occasionally overlooked."

".... Could we hurry up and start already?"

"Eek ...! Y-yes, of course! Please, make your way to the seats in the back ....!"

Putting the girl's true identity aside, it would be a good idea to end this as soon as possible.

But suppose she was a ghost, it wasn't like she'd intentionally do me any harm. Most likely.

.... I didn't think there would be any curses or anything, either. Probably.

But, if instead of picking up the controller with her own hand, she made it float in midair and started manipulating it, that's when I would run. Persuading myself in a manner that I didn't really understand, I made my way towards the seats.

I arrived at the seats together with the girl, but even now, my heart was still beating at a quickened pace.

Slowly glancing over at the girl, I could faintly catch a glimpse of the girl's face from the glow of the monitor in front of her.

She had a fair complexion and long, pretty hair. Although her eyes were rather unpleasant, she had a nice, even face, and would no doubt grow up to be a beauty.

However, with the way the light was hitting it right now, it looked very much like the face of a girl straight out of a horror movie.

I quickly started the game before I began to lose my mind.

“Ah, u-umm, as I explained earlier, it’s a shooting game with a point system! If you score a higher number of points than me, you will be presented with a fabulous prize! A-and, so, about the difficulty level of the game ....?”

“.... Normal.”

“Ah, right! Of course! My apologies! Now then~ les’sart!”

As I accidentally slurred my words at the end, the boy who was standing behind the girl snickered.

I became instantly embarrassed just hearing that.

There were various thoughts swirling around in my head, but at any rate, I focused on ending this as quickly as possible.

Setting the difficulty to “normal,” I pressed start at the title screen, and enemies began appearing in groups.

Compared to the extra mode that I had played earlier, in this mode, there were significantly fewer enemies, and a much lower number of possible points.

And, this was just a feeling I had, but compared to the extra mode, there was also an overwhelming number of pig enemies; they seemed to be this mode’s characteristic feature.

It had been one minute since the game started.

The girl’s playing style wasn’t particularly characteristic, and was generally fairly ordinary.

It was a slightly unsatisfactory fight for me, who had played the extra mode against that kind of veteran during the first round, but this was probably to be expected from a normal girl.

Although I could hear occasional cries of “Kyah!” in a cute voice, she was playing indifferently.

Suppose she started off her days going, “Ughh, this is sooo hard, it’s so annoying~” and “Haha, guess it can’t be helped, oh well,” and then later threw away her forced smile and put on that Hannya Mask. Just thinking about it seemed easy to do.

However, with thirty second remaining on the clock, a sudden disaster occurred on my screen.

A strange bug caused both the pig enemies and the aiming crosshairs for my gun to disappear.

“H-huh .....!? Some kind of malfunction ....?”

Behind the girl, the boy was snickering, “Do your best without getting scared, Kido!”

I desperately tried to keep hitting the enemies, but without knowing where I was aiming, it was no use.

And in that time, the point difference between us was quickly reducing. I’d held back early on so that there wouldn’t be a huge difference between us, but to think that it would turn against me ...!

Just as it was getting bad, the buzzer for the end of the game sounded.

Since I’d played so desperately, I didn’t know what had become of the points. I closed my eyes in prayer before the results screen showed.

If I lost here, the prize would be lost to the second customer.

It was an unavoidable situation that couldn’t have been dealt with.

As the fanfare sounded, the results screen pulled up. I opened my eyes very slowly to confirm it, and by only a meager 100 point difference, the word “WIN” was shown on my side of the points.

Sweat dripped down. To think that an error in the game would cause us to fall into this kind of pinch ....

Either way, was it possible that that stupid teacher had pulled something at this crucial part?

Just as I was thinking this, I heard the boy chuckling from beside me.

“Hahaha, looks like you lost, Kido. But it’d be wrong even if you won by cheating, right? Come on, you have to apologize to Onee-san.”

As she was told this by the boy, the girl's expression looked like she was suppressing tears of mortification.

" .... I'm sorry."

She said in a slightly shaky voice, rose from her chair and headed towards the door with quick steps.

"Wait, cheating ....? But that was an error with the game, so it wasn't her fault at all."

No matter how you looked at it, that phenomenon just now couldn't have been cheating. She hadn't hacked the computer or directly interfered, so there had been no foul play.

Even as I said this, the boy continued to grin.

"Sorry, Onee-san. You may not believe me, but earlier, that girl used a psychic ability. You'll know if you check, but the machine's not broken, and the game is fine, too. It should work without any problems next time, so don't worry."

After saying this, the boy headed after the girl, and left the room and into the hallway without looking back.

The moment the two of them exited out into the hallway, I heard Haruka scream, "Uwaaaaah!" Just like how it was with me, it was probably because he hadn't noticed the girl's presence.

Letting go of my controller, I stared dumbfounded in the direction of the door that they had left through.

It almost felt like I'd been deceived by a fox.

A ghost girl with a psychic ability, and a boy who wouldn't stop smiling ....

Even if I told this story to someone, I'd probably be cut off in a single stroke with, "You watch too much anime."

Just as I expected, Haruka burst into the room and, also just as I expected, he said this,

"Was that girl here this whole time!? I didn't even notice at all!"

"Wasn't she ....? I mean, look ...."

I pointed at the display screen that showed the records of the close match that the girl had fought with me.

\*

Around 12:00, after the morning passed, the school became enveloped by fragrant aromas.

Seeing as how this was the hour that food and drink-type booths like cafés and food stalls were most active, it was the most ideal time for attraction-type booths like us to take our break.

Exiting the dark Science Preparation Room, I hung up a sign that said, “On break until 1:00” on the outside of the door so that Haruka and I could go out and have lunch together.

I’d challenged about a dozen other people during the morning, and being blessed with honest, normal customers after that boy and girl, we were able to make it until noon without any further problems.

“I was really worried about how the first hour would go ..... At first, I was convinced that you only picked out weird customers to bring in.”

“Ehh!? Th-that’s not true! I just introduced the booth to whoever happened to pass by, that’s all .....”

The space spread out in front of the main entrance was crowded with food stands in the middle of setting up, filled with blue tarp and cardboard.

From yakitori to hot dogs, and French fries to yakisoba and more, all the colored signboards helped to work up an appetite.

As I walked with Haruka while looking back on the morning’s events, I spotted a lunch area to the right side of the front gate where we could sit down and eat what we’d buy.

“Ah, how about going over there for lunch? We eat in the classroom every day, so every once in a while it’s ..... hey, wait!!”

“Mn? Mmwut?”

Before I’d even noticed, Haruka was standing there with his arms full of food, and eating a fried squid in a way that made it look really delicious.

“.... Honestly, don’t you know anything about cooperating? I thought we were going to go around and take a look together ..... Anyway, when did you even buy all that!?”

“Nn, pwah! Ah, sorry, sorry, it just all looked so delicious, so I couldn’t help myself ....! Ah, Takane, I’ll give you some, too. Here, eat whatever you’d like!”

In the bag that Haruka held out, there was a large quantity of packs of things like yakisoba and okonomiyaki that seemed like they could become main dishes.

“Uu .... That’s a pretty nice selection. Well, anyway, let’s just sit down somewhere and start eating. The seats in the back look like they’re free.”

Finding an area that seemed empty, I looked back at Haruka and said this, and saw that he was already onto his next victim, a hot dog, and nodding his head without saying anything.

The spot I’d found was right in the shade, and walking there together, we sat down. Today, we were lucky to have nice weather; the perfect day for a School Culture Festival.

It was even a little hot out, and many were wearing light clothing.

Since Haruka and I thought we’d be moving around quite a bit, we’d also come in light clothes.

The moment we sat down, Haruka cried out, “I can’t wait anymore!” and started to take the food out of the bag with an extremely happy face.

It would seem that the food he’d shown me earlier had only been a part of it; one after another, he spread out about five to six serving’s worth of food onto the table.

“F-four-dimensional bag ....?”

With so much food that it seemed impossible that it had all fit in one bag, Haruka decided to start eating from an okonomiyaki after a moment of indecision.

I was also pretty hungry, and so I picked up a sauce yakisoba and pulled it towards me.

“Alright then, time to e— .... Wait, I haven’t paid, right? How much was this?”

I felt bad about being treated, so I pulled my wallet out of my skirt pocket.

“Ah, it’s fine, really. Actually, Sensei told me, “Eat whatever you like with this,” and gave me some money this morning. About 10,000 yen. So it’s fine!”

“10,000 yen!? That much!? Haah~ .... That teacher, even though he was so selfish when it came to the budget for the booth, he can actually be pretty generous!”

“Ah, while he was making the game, he told me he went to pachinko for a change of pace, and ended up winning a lot. He even ordered sushi take-out for dinner that day.”

The moment I heard that, my slightly increased rating of Tateyama-sensei fell back down to the lowest of lows. And at the same time, I could only see the delicious food in front of me as by-products of gambling, and fell into a very depressed mood.

“Hm? Aren’t you going to eat, Takane? If you won’t, then I’ll ....”

“I-I am! Anyway, just how much are you gonna eat!? You’re definitely gonna get fat, y’know!?”

When it came to the food stalls at the Culture Festival, it was a festival of high calorie food. Truthfully, I wanted to pig out on fried chicken, but no matter how much of a festival today was, tomorrow was just a normal day again.

It was obvious that the calories I merrily ingested today would turn into suffering for my body tomorrow.

As I was worrying about this, Haruka went through eating a hot dog, crepe, pizza stick, French fries, and chocolate-covered banana at an amazing pace. The abnormal amount was one thing, but just watching him eat all of that at once gave me heartburn.

“It’s so good, though. Ah, but no matter how much I eat, I never get fat, anyway~ I don’t bring much for lunch to school, but I always eat about this much at home.”

As I listened to this, I compared the amount that Haruka was eating to his body type and felt incredibly annoyed.

If I overate even just a little bit, my body weight would undergo a serious change; it wasn’t fair.

“Ahh~ .... I wish I could just have a body that never gets hungry and doesn’t need to eat .... And also, a body that doesn’t need to sleep, either.”

"Eh~ But that'd be boring. After all, I love eating and sleeping."

Haruka said this as he happily took the wrapping off of a hamburger.

".... You sure live a happy life."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

As he asked this with ketchup on his cheek, somehow, I found it hard to hate him. Even so, I prayed silently that he would complain about gaining around ten kilograms tomorrow.

\*

1:30 PM.

As planned, we had resumed business for our target shooting booth, but completely unlike the morning, there was no one coming by at all.

"That's weird. It wasn't like this at all this morning. Could it be that there's a bad rumor going around ....?"

I stuck my head outside the door and checked up and down the hallway. Haruka was standing in front of the classroom and waiting for customers as usual, but in the first place, there didn't seem to be many people in the hall at all.

Just when I was starting to feel anxious, Haruka seemed to remember something and pulled out a folded print-out from his pocket.

"Oh, right, right. I'm sure this is why, Takane."

The print-out that Haruka had pulled out was the schedule of all the classes' booths for the day of the Culture Festival.

I'd lost mine soon after they'd been distributed, but because it was annoying to ask Haruka to show me his, I hadn't said anything this whole time. Thanks to that, I had no idea about the other classes' booths for today.

"Ah, ahh, okay .... So, which one's the reason that no one's coming?"

"It's this one, the 'Student Council Presentation' that's from 1 to 2 PM in the gym. I think everyone probably went to see that."

In the print-out where Haruka was pointing, it was certainly written, “‘Student Council Presentation’ 1PM-2PM.” And what was more, it was the only one outlined with a thick frame and stood out a lot.

“I see. Sheesh, so the Student Council wants to stand out too, huh? Anyway, there should have just had it later, and not in the time frame that booths are open .... This probably isn’t good for any of the other classes either, right?”

I didn’t really like the strong assertiveness given off by the print-out’s design, either.

Even though we’d gone to the trouble of eating a proper lunch to prepare for the battles in the afternoon, it couldn’t be helped that no one was even coming.

“Well, after another thirty minutes, I’m sure we’ll have a lot of customers then. So until then, let’s just take the chance to relax for a while longer.”

Folding up the print-out again, Haruka opened the door I was sticking my head out of and came inside.

“Guess it can’t be helped. Ah~ I wish someone stupider would come~ I’d give it my all to be their opponent.”

As I voiced that complaint and was about to pull my head back inside, I caught sight of someone by the front door on the left side of the hallway.

Even though there hadn’t been a soul around earlier, I now saw three men wearing the exact same clothes.

They wore camouflage pants, bandanas, and goggles, as if they’d just dropped by here on their way home from a survival game.

“Wh-what’s with those people ....? Some kind of costume? But they seem like normal customers, so could those be their normal clothes ...?”

But if those were normal clothes, that kind of style was a little overdoing it. It’s be more acceptable if it were a costume, since I could see something that looked like a transceiver on the shoulder strap of the rucksack they were carrying on their backs.

“What’s wrong, Takane?”

“Um, yeah .... There’s some suspicious-looking people .... Should we call a teacher or something?”

“Suspicious people? W-wait, let me see.”

Haruka said this, stuck out his head above mine, and stared down the hall.

“See? They look kind of suspicious, right? That’s obviously not the kind of clothes you’d come here in ....”

“I wonder about that. It might be that kind of style, you know? The military fashion type.”

The fact that Haruka said “style” was what shocked me. Surprisingly, did this guy know a lot about that kind of stuff ....?

If that was the case, what I’d called “suspicious” earlier might actually be the “latest style” .... And if so, would that make me the one that’s actually old-fashioned?

“W-well yeah, I see it around a lot lately .... That kind of clothing is popular in, like ... Tokyo? Or something like that ....”

There was no choice but to just go with it. For now, I’d try praising them a bit. But more than anything, I didn’t want it to seem like these guys knew more about trends than I did.

“Wow, really?! I had no idea about that .... As expected of Takane!”

Haruka’s bright smile pierced my heart. If I really thought about it, there was no way that a guy who was fine with being half-naked knew anything about fashion sense.

Having dug a grave with my useless vanity, I stuttered out a, “Y-yeah, I guess ....” which further increased my guilty conscience.

“Excuse me, but may we please ask something of you?”

“Huh?”

Hearing an unexpected voice, I lifted my head and saw that the military group from earlier was standing there.

While I’d been so engrossed in that silly conversation with Haruka, they’d come up so close that it was shocking.

“E-EEK!! Y-yes, of course! What is it!”

Looking at them from up close, this group seemed incredibly intimidating.

Although at first I'd thought it was three men in inappropriate dress for school, for some reason, their numbers had now increased to six.

"Uwah!"

Haruka didn't seem to have noticed either, and after leaning back in surprise, he hid behind me. So pathetic.

"We apologize for startling you. Actually, we're looking for a booth. We heard about a famous 'shooting game' at this Culture Festival that was accepting challengers ..."

"I-I see .... Eh!? Ah, umm, well, that .... probably means us ..."

I was surprised that these guys were good, courteous young men, but I was even more surprised that they were looking for our booth.

The men in front of me also started buzzing in surprise.

"O-ohh, so it was here! S-speaking of which, the person that will be the opponent is ....?"

Almost as if this was to determine if this was the shooting booth they were seeking or not, they asked me this question, treating me like their superior officer.

"Eh? U-uhh .... That ... would be me?"

Not know what this group was after, I put some distance between us, and replied with only my eye peeking out from the crack in the door.

And as I did, the group cheered out, "Ohhhhhhhh!!!"

For some reason, the young man speaking at the head of the group started bursting into tears. D-don't tell this, this reaction is .... I had a bad feeling .....

"F-forgive my rudeness ...! Then, this would mean that you are LightningDancerEne-sama, correct .....!? It's such an honor to finally—"

Hearing up until this point, I slammed the door shut with a bang!

Just as I thought. They were my fans from the online game.

Judging from their appearance, they were probably participants from the tournament.

If I'd known that earlier, I could have just lied about this being the shooting booth as well as about the opponent being me! How stupid could I get!?

But, how did they know .....? No, it was simple.

The first customer, the sullen man, must have posted online something like, "LightningDancerEne is holding a 2P shooting game! Gamers in the area should check it out! It's so worth it!"

That was the only way I could imagine the information might have leaked. I should have warned those guys earlier when I had the chance.

"T-Takane .... Who were those people earlier ....?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, it's nothing! They already left!"

Although I said this to the concerned-looking Haruka with a sweaty smile, immediately after, we heard severe knocking from the door behind me, accompanied by the painful cries of the men, going, "Please!! Allow me to compete against you just once!!" "Please!! Please!!"

Ahh, who was the one that suggested we do a shooting game, anyway? No, it was me. If I'd known it'd turn out like this, it would have been a thousand times better to have just gone with the maid café.

Judging by the gradually increasing noise of the voices from outside, it probably meant that even more "soldiers" had come due to that information leak.

".... Oh, what does it even matter anymore."

Muttering this, I opened the door and saw that the soldiers had already increased by more than ten people. The moment I appeared, the cries turned to low cheers.

I threw the door open all the way and shouted, "I am Ene!! I'll challenge all of you one by one, so those who wish to die, come forth!!"

Behind me, I heard Haruka say, "Ene .... So cool ....." in admiration, and this time, the flowing tears were a signal of the end of my youth.

\*

..... It'd been about two hours since then.

The inside of the classroom was filled with an audience, and there were even crowds of people outside.

After playing against several veterans, and as such, having created the “New Dancer Legend,” my tears of shame had long since dried up.

“.... She’s won again!! This makes the 45<sup>th</sup> consecutive victory!!”

The cheers rose up once more, and as the challenger cried tears of honor, he paid words of tribute to me, and then left his seat.

With all the challengers being gamers, and not at all like normal customers, it was difficult to tell that this strange scene was a booth at a School Culture Festival.

“Ene, can you keep going!? There’s still about ten minutes until it’s over, so do your best until the very end!”

Crouching on the right side of my seat, Haruka had somehow come to call me “Ene,” and continued to cheer me on like he was my coach.

“Yeah, it’ll be over soon .... Although, it’s already all over for me .... Fufufu .....”

I leaned back and muttered deliriously. Starting tomorrow, there would probably be rumors about me going around school.

Maybe I should just walk around with a name tag that says “Ene.”

Just as I was thinking about this and had reached a selfless zen-like state, a new challenger came to the seat.

Up until now, all the challengers were bulky-looking men, but this time, it was a young boy wearing a red jersey, and around the same height as the two parka-wearing kids that had been the second customers.

Just as I sat up in surprise, Haruka tapped my shoulder from beside me.

“Ene .... I’m sorry to say this just when you’re getting all fired up, but I think it’s about time that we let someone win. I know it might be hard, but do you think you could lose to him ....?”

Haruka said this in a very hesitant voice. Just how much longer was he going to keep on misunderstanding? It wasn’t like I was getting fired up or anything at all.

But, it *was* true that it might be a good time to lose here.

Well, it was a little hard for my pride to lose to a guy younger than me, but this was a “service” decided before the game.

And it was better than losing to one of those gamers, anyway ....

For the sake of this event being a success, I couldn't betray myself here. Seeing as how it was the last customer, as well, I forced a smile on for the first time in a while.

"You're the next challenger, right? Nice to meet you! Do you know the rules, or should I explain them to you just once?"

I managed to speak in a splendid "Cute Onee-san Voice." If it was a boy of this age, it was possible that he might end up falling for me in some puppy-dog crush. —I was such a sinful woman.

"..... You may be taking advantage of being no.2 in the nationals right now, but from I can see, you're no big deal. Your judgment is sloppy, and so are your movements. Just looking at you irritates me."

Contrary to what I'd imagined, the jersey-wearing boy muttered this without even making eye contact.

"Eh ....? Ah, sorry, Onee-san here didn't quite hear you, so ....."

I must have just heard wrong. There was no way that such a cute boy had said those sharp words.

"I said, 'You're weak.' Just hurry up and start the game. I don't care what difficulty you make it."

—I heard something snap inside my head. After hearing it the second time, there was no mistake. He was calling me "weak."

A mere kid was making fun of my play style. *My* play style that was worshipped as being like a "Dancer."

"Wh-why you .... Calling me weak .... Are you trying to say you'll win against me!?"

"Yeah, I'll win. I'll definitely win. Because you're weak."

I'd had enough. The blood vessels in my head seemed about to burst because of the how much my blood was boiling right now.

But because he was younger than me, I couldn't lash out at him.

Yes, all I had to do was win, against this weakling that did nothing but talk big. I would personally teach him how the world worked; that there were winners and there were losers.

“O-oh, is that so now~ ....! I see, I see ....! So you’re fine with having a match with me at the highest difficult, right? I DEFINITELY won’t lose though!”

The controller I was holding starting making cracking noises from how hard I was gripping it.

Beside me, Haruka quietly said, “Wait, Takane, you’re supposed to lose to him!” but that voice no longer reached my ears.

—This was a battle where my pride was at stake.

Right now, there was no other way but to crush this jersey boy and protect my pride.

“Fine. If you win, I’ll listen to whatever you say. And if you lose, what will you do?”

As he said this, the boy looked at me for the first time. His sharp and somehow melancholy eyes gave off a cold pressure, almost as if looking right through me.

“I-If I lose, then I’ll listen to anything you say! I’ll become your servant and even call you ‘Master’ if you want me to! I definitely won’t lose!”

“Oh really. You really are boring, after all. Whatever, let’s just start.”

The boy said and faced the display screen again.

Even without looking at a mirror, I already knew that my face was bright red from being so worked up.

I’ll knock him down .....! This guy’s the only one I’ll definitely knock down!

Taking one deep breath, I selected the “extra” difficult and pressed the start button.

“I’ll make you regret making a fool out of me ....!”

With the decisive match finally begun, enemies appeared on the screen.

In the end, I had scored my personal best today. I was certain that I had played very well, and had been completely focused.

However, when the results screen showed up, the word “LOSE,” spelling my defeat, were shown.

And on the boy’s screen was the word “WIN” in gold, and furthermore, below that .... it showed the word “PERFECT!!” in red lettering.

“You’re .... kidding .....

Unable to grasp the situation even now, the boy simply said to me, “It’s a bother, so you can forget about that promise,” and left the classroom.

Haruka hurriedly stood up to give him the specimen prize.

“Ah .... I’ll go give this to him! Ene, you were really cool up until the end! Good work!”

I wasn’t able to give any kind of reply to Haruka’s words, either.

I’d been made a fool of by someone younger than me, bluffed to that extent, and still lost.

All around me, a discussion had started: “She lost on purpose!” “No, but looking by the points, that’s the highest today! Which means that Ene lost!?” However, I didn’t care about that at all.

—It was so frustrating. That was all I felt as I was unable to let go of the controller, even now.

“U-um .... I apologize that my friend said such rude things ....”

The one that unexpectedly spoke to me was girl with semi-long hair.

Even though it wasn’t so cold today, for some reason she was wearing a red muffler, and gave off a very frail vibe.

“..... Are you ... a friend of that guy from earlier?”

Putting the controller on the desk as I asked this, the girl answered shyly, “.... In a way.”

Did this mean that that jersey boy, with that strong hand, had come to the Culture Festival with a girl!? The flames of my fury started to fire up, but with how apologetic the girl seemed, my emotions were dampened.

"I see .... Well, it's fine. He was strong, and it's also been a while since I had that much fun. But, you should warn him about his attitude, y'know!? He'll never make it in the real world like that."

I huffed, and the girl sighed with a forced smile.

"That's ... true. He's not very good with people, or well, better put, he can be self-centered sometimes ... I'll be sure to warn him later. I really am so sorry ...."

"N-no, you shouldn't have to apologize .... Well, I'm sure he has a lot going on at that age. It'll be fine as long you have a proper talk with him."

"Yes, I'll do so. Ah, oh no, I've been left behind! I'm sorry, but I'll also be excusing myself here, since I have to go and meet my father after this, as well ..."

Bowing her head, the girl left the room in a hurry.

With the prize gone, customers gradually began to leave, and the people that were my fans said, "We apologize for intruding," and quickly left the room.

Watching this as I remained sitting in the chair, the clock soon displayed the ending time of the Culture Festival; 4:00.

I heard an announcement coming from the speakers in the hallway: "Thank you for waiting, the event has come to a close. Each class, please follow the instructions given by the Executive Committee and begin cleaning up."

As I heard that, my exhaustion suddenly hit me. Honestly, I'd wound up being involved in so many unexpected things today, and even gone through ridiculous shock, but once it was all over, it was actually pretty fun.

Also, it'd be nice if the fact that I was "Ene" didn't spread around anymore than it had, and eventually faded from everyone's memories .....

As I thought about these things, I waited for Haruka's return.

He'd worked hard today too, so maybe I should reward him just this once.

Right, maybe I should treat him to something to eat on our way home ..... No, that was no good. If I spent my measly pocket money on that guy, it would all disappear in an instant. What if we split the bill .... No, we should just pay for our own portions. Yeah, that would be best.

Come to think of it, there was still a lot left over from the food money that Sensei had given us.

It would be a good idea to use it before he asked us to give it back.

With my cheek leaning on the teacher's desk, I silently fiddled with the controller and waited for fifteen minutes.

..... Haruka still wasn't back.

Even though he'd only gone to hand over the prize, he was taking way too long.

Where on earth could he be lazing around?

The ticking of the clock rang out in the room .... After the booths had closed, each class had to clean up and leave the school by 5:00.

Of course, we also had to do so, but it would take a lot of time for two people to do everything.

"That guy .... Don't tell me he's trying to skip out."

—No, he's the last one to do something like that. It was obvious that I'd send him flying the next day if he did, and more importantly, he was more earnest than anyone.

But, that's what made it strange that he still wasn't back by now.

As I thought about the possibility of him lazing around somewhere, I suddenly had a very bad feeling.

What if he'd had an attack while running to catch up?

I remembered hearing that Haruka's illness was so serious that it was endangering to his life.

But because of his usual behavior and personality, it didn't seem like that in the slightest, so I had never worried about his illness at all.

However, he'd been staying up late for the past few days, run the booth with me for most of the day, and after that, gone running out of here.

As I thought about it more, my bad feeling got even worse, and my heartbeat quickened.

I jumped up from the desk, making a loud noise as I knocked over the chair.

But, I didn't care about that.

Right now, Haruka might have collapsed somewhere.

He could be in pain, without anyone realizing.

As I thought of that, I felt an agonizing sensation.

I wish I'd realized it sooner. He was such a weak person.

Even so, I hadn't been worried at all, and kept on pushing him recklessly.

"Haruka ....."

Facing the door, I opened it in one pull ....! Just as I was about to dash out with the momentum, my body—flew straight into the person standing in front of me.

"Uwaaah!!"

"Kyaaaah!!"

Crashing into them, I was thrown back into the classroom, and fell down hard on my bottom. As I cried out from the pain running through my waist, I raised my head, and saw a familiar boy, collapsed with dizzy eyes in the hallway.

"H-Haruka!?"

"Owowoww, that's dangerous ..... What's wrong, Takane .....? Why're you in such a rush ....?"

"—Idiot .....! I-I was worried ....."

Feeling both relieved and also concerned that I'd knocked him over, I stood up, and headed towards him as if about to hug him.

—But, when I noticed the sauce around Haruka's mouth, as well as the packs of various food scattered around him from the impact of being run into, those feelings converted into a feeling of wanting to kick him.

"..... What do you think you're doing?"

While rubbing my waist in pain, I stopped right in front of Haruka and asked this while looking down at him.

"Eh? Well, since the booths are closing, I thought I'd go and get the leftover food before it's all thrown out! Ah, hey, look at how much there is! We can have a party today! Isn't that great!?"

..... My anger was quickly starting to build up.

I felt my clenched fists and both my cheeks heat up. Ahh, I was such a big idiot for worrying over this guy for even a second.

"..... Takane? Are you angry or something?"

The moment Haruka asked this, I brought my fist down on his head.

Right at that timing, an announcement was made throughout the school about the MVP of today's booths, and apparently, it had been our booth.

However, because the announcement had been drowned out by my shouting and Haruka's cries of agony, the two of us didn't find out about this until several days later.

—

Translation Notes:

\*chuunibyō = “Middle School 2nd Year Syndrome”. In this case, Takane is afraid Haruka might think she’s really disillusioned and takes everything about the game and her avatar too seriously.

\*Onē-san = “Big Sister”. Common for kids to call older strangers this, even when not actually related.

### Headphone Actor III

here was no longer anyone else around me.

Blocked by buildings, the sunset that had previously been hidden could be seen very well from this place.

The light that dyed the world crimson red, I thought it to look almost like a fire that consumed everything.

Dashing up the steep slope, breath faint, I reached the top of the hill.

The owner of the voice in the headphones that led me here muttered something, but because I was fully concentrating on catching my breath, I couldn’t understand what was said.

It was most likely already the time to say that everything was over. No, perhaps it already had been.

However, upon arriving at the top of the hill, there was nothing there.

To be more precise, there was only a huge wall that projected a huge sky.

“.... This isn’t right.”

I felt a great sense of discomfort at something not being there, although I couldn’t remember what that was.

My quickened breath slowly returned to its normal rhythm.

Gradually, the meaning behind this sense of discomfort became clear.

—It wasn’t that something wasn’t here.

“He” wasn’t here.

“Even though I thought I’d finally be able to tell him .....”

Those words came out from my mouth unconsciously.

My extended shadow became thinner.

Dusk had already ended.

「.... As I thought, it was already ... too late. Even though here– even though this place was the only place to tell him .....”!」

Hearing those words from the headphones, even though I couldn’t remember, they seemed to speak for what was in my heart.

「In the end, it was all over! Everything .... all of it– .....”!」

—Just give up already.

I can’t meet with “him” anymore.

I know that already.

「If it’s ... this kind of world, it’s better to just —-!」

Don’t say something like that.

Although I didn’t make it,  
at the very end, I–

—realized my own feelings.

When I turned around at that time, the town was already entering its final moments.  
From beyond the collapsed sky, I muttered my last words to the girl.

“..... I’m sorry .... Takane.”



I gazed out at the burnt wreckage of the program in my fading consciousness.  
The words that came from the headphones were words more than enough to invite me back into sleep.

### **Yuukei Yesterday III**

A midsummer day.

Outside of the window was a bright, blue sky. In the far-off distance, huge cumulonimbus clouds could be seen.

“.... It’s no use, I don’t get this at all ....”

In the classroom, a furious summer course was unfolding.

Haruka was breezing through the piles of worksheets in front of him, but as for me, I was barely getting through this tough battle as I decoded each question.

Quite some time had passed since that Culture Festival, and we had become second year students in high school.

Although, as usual, the only students in this class were Haruka and I, and unfortunately, the homeroom teacher was still Tateyama-sensei.

As we became second year students, the material gradually became more difficult, and as for me, who honestly wasn’t very smart, my score averages continued to drop.

“Huh? Takane, your hand stopped moving again. Do you want me to show you how to do it one more time?”

Haruka had already done nearly twice as much as I had, and earlier, I’d tasted the humiliation of having him teach me the problems that I just couldn’t understand at all.

“Sh-shut up! I’m almost done solving it, so be quiet!”

Even as I said this and went back to concentrating on my worksheet, I barely understood what I’d written down.

Even though it was math, there was English as well, and rather than answering, it was writing out formulas; it was a mess.

“Ahaha, sorry, sorry. That’s true, there’s no point if you can’t do it yourself when possible! Good luck!”

Haruka struck a guts pose, and returned to working smoothly on his own work.

Damn it .... Couldn’t he have stayed with me for a little while longer?

This was bad. At this rate, I’d be the only one left behind in the classroom again.

Whenever Haruka finished his problems, he always asked me, “Want me to help?”

He was probably just purely trying to cooperate, but if I kept allowing him to do so, all my dignity would disappear.

That’s why today, just as usual, I drove him off by saying, “I want to do it on my own, so hurry up and go home!”

Ahh .... What was I even doing? My valuable summer vacation was being wasted because of my bad grades and strange pride.

My initial plans had been to prepare for the upcoming game tournament by doing a self-training camp in my room, but I never would have dreamed that I’d be losing time over something like this.

“Haah, what do I do? I feel like I’m completely out of practice .... And I haven’t logged in for two days, either. Maybe I should just give up this time ...”

I complained as my dropped my cheek on top of the worksheets. At the same time, Haruka muttered, “Done,” and started gathering up his papers that had all the answers filled in.

“Eh!? Haruka, you’re finished!? Eh, wait, you’re leaving already!?”

In my surprise at him finishing so quickly, the words that came out of my mouth sounded like I’d be lonely if he went home. I started to correct myself, but Haruka didn’t pay any attention to me, and put his bag on top of the desk.

"Ah .... W-well, you can leave if you want. Just go home and stuff yourself silly. I'll be fine working here on my own."

I'd ended up overdoing the excuse. As I crossed my arms, however, Haruka glanced sideways at me and said "Eh? But I'm not leaving," and took out a laptop from his bag.

It slowly started up, and once it did, he entered his password in the login screen with a familiar speed. Once logged in, along with the game's title screen, a character with white hair and a black collar, named "Konoha," was displayed.

"Wh-whaaat!? Just what are you thinking!? Are you going to start playing here!? Right next to me!?"

"Yeah! Since the tournament is soon, and if I play right next to you, then you'll want to play too and finish your work faster, right?"

"No, I'm going to get distracteddddd ahhhhhh I can't take it anymore!! I wanna play too!! Give it to me!"

"Uwaah! Y-you can't!! You have to finish your work, first!"

That's right; the game that Haruka had started playing was the one that I participated in tournaments for.

Ever since that Culture Festival, Haruka had gained knowledge he was better off not knowing, and started playing this online game.

At first, I'd thought he'd be sure to grow bored of it right away, but he soon got hooked, and quickly became really good at it.

He'd become a rather famous player in the game, and was so skilled that he was one of the winning candidates for the next tournament.

..... The start of all this leads back to the night of the Culture Festival.

\*

".... Well, somehow or other, that's the Culture Festival. It was fun in the end, wasn't it?"

"Honestly, there's too many things that'll become trauma for me, though ..... Ah! This xiaolongbao tastes so good~"

“Mwut Takwame’s mwas mweary amwazing tohway.”

“Haruka, that’s gross! Swallow first before you talk! And Sensei, you’re taking advantage of the situation and drinking too much!! How many is that already!?”

Tateyama-sensei, Haruka, and I had gone out to eat dinner to celebrate the festival ending.

In the end, Haruka had eaten up all the food he’d received at an alarming pace, and after the two of us rushed to clean everything up, we’d somehow managed to wrap up the Culture Festival.

While cleaning, I’d kicked Haruka every time he called me “Ene,” but he didn’t seem to understand at all why I was angry at him. It was so irritating.

Afterwards, almost as if he’d been waiting for the right moment, Tateyama-sensei had appeared, trying to look cool by saying things like, “A hero always arrives late .....” Just as I’d done with Haruka, I kicked him mercilessly and made him take us out to dinner as an apology for being late.

“But you know~ It was really cool~ What was it called again? ‘Phantom Waltz— Holy Nightmare— ’? When Ene was taking down enemies one after another ....!”

“I told you to never say that name ever again!! Aaaaah ..... this is the worst .....”

Because the Chinese restaurant I’d chosen to come to was a distance away from the school, there weren’t any other students from the same Culture Festival.

I put my elbow down on the table in a space that wasn’t crowded by stacked plates and covered my face in agony with my palm.

“Hahaha! So you were given away in the end, huh! Well, it’s not such a bad thing, so don’t let it bother you—Ene, that hurts!”

I punched Tateyama-sensei’s upper arm and let out a large sigh.

In order to drown out my sorrows, I drank the orange juice that was in front of me all in one go.

“That’s right, there’s no reason to hide it! But, you know, the name ‘Ene’ is using the first and last letters from ‘Enomoto Takane’, right?”

“Y-yeah .... It does ... And what of it?”

“Eh? Oh, no, I just thought it was interesting. Like, a name that’s not actually your real name is so cool~ I want something like that, too!”

Haruka muttered this while finishing up the last dish (How many servings had he even eaten today?) and waiting restlessly for the next one.

But, without knowing the state of his stomach now, or if it was starting to hurt, it was weird that his eating pace still hadn’t slowed down.

“Then, how about this? Something related to ‘LightningDancer,’ too—no, wait!! I’m sorry, lower your fist!!”

I silenced Tateyama-sensei with intimidation, who kept on saying unnecessary things. It would soon be 8:00 PM, but since tomorrow was a day-off, we still had plenty of time.

“A handle name is something you come up with your own, so just back off, both of you. It’s embarrassing ....”

Before Haruka ate them all, I took some of the chili shrimp onto my own plate and answered their harassing questions while complaining.

“Maybe I should think of something, too! Since my name’s ‘Kokonose Haruka’ .... Something like ‘Konoha’!”

“Yeah, yeah, isn’t that good enough? Nice to meet you, Konoha-kun.”

I replied half-heartedly just to shut him up, but Haruka was happier than I expected, and was strangely fired up, “Ohhh! As I thought, this is pretty good ....! I’ll go with this next time!”

\*

—And that’s how it had come to this.

“B-but it’s not fair that you’re playing so much!! Getting better all on your own ... Even though I really want to play right now!”

“That’s your own fault, Takane~ I finished all my work already, after all. Once you’re finished, we can play together, so work hard, okay?”

It was obvious to anyone that what Haruka said was reasonable, but I could only make excuses like a little kid, going, “But ...” “Oh, come on ....”

And also, I realized anew the difference between me, who had bad grades because of laziness, and Haruka, who wouldn't need summer courses since he actually focused on his studies.

That's right, Haruka hadn't come to summer courses because of bad grades. Judging by the speed that he solved problems, just that alone probably made him the top in the class.

His behavior in class was, of course, excellent, and he didn't need any kind of guidance. However, where Haruka was lacking in were the very important "attendance days."

In December of last year, Tateyama-sensei and I have been invited to the Christmas party that Haruka had planned all on his own.

Since it was also his birthday, I remember going out of my way to buy a present to surprise him.

With my meager allowance, I did my best to save up enough money, and although it was heartbreaking to use up the savings I'd finally managed to build up, I somehow cheered up by imagining how happy Haruka would be to receive my present.

—But, on the day of the party, Haruka had an attack and collapsed.

Fortunately, because he'd been rushed to the hospital right away, it hadn't been too serious.

At that time, Tateyama-sensei and I had been in the middle of rushing to make about five serving's worth of food, but even so, Haruka became hospitalized from that day on.

He was discharged after a week, at the end of winter break, and was well enough to come to school afterwards, but a month later, he had another attack.

This time, his condition wasn't getting better, and he couldn't leave the ward for about a month.

But rather than worrying about his own health, Haruka worried about the online game he'd been addicted to at the time and kept saying to me, "Once I get out, I have to get practicing."

After that, the two of us were able to advance to the next grade level, but Haruka's health weakened, and even when it wasn't so bad that he had to be hospitalized, he was often absent from class.

And so, currently, he was making up for his insufficient attendance by taking summer courses.

Haruka didn't complain, and instead said, "If I'm taking them with Takane, it's actually fun," but I wondered how he really felt.

—I ... couldn't understand him very well.

"Ah, there's a new weapon! Is it because the tournament's coming up? Hmm, 'wonder if I should buy it~ ...."

Haruka was staring excitedly at the display screen, and I couldn't feel even the slightest sign of depression from him.

No, if I thought about it, I'd never seen him become depressed at all.

Even when I was his only classmate, or when our class was the only one that had to sit out and watch the athletic meet he'd been looking forward to, or even when he'd been hospitalized and couldn't come to school; he smiled.

And always, *always*, I got mad at Haruka's smile, was appalled by it .... And also, I was captivated by it.

"Hey, Haruka ..."

"Eh? What is it? Oh, w-wait just a second, okay? The battle's just started!"

Without taking his eyes away from the screen, Haruka desperately waged the battle.

The way he played the game while muttering to himself was almost like an innocent kid.

.... But, he really was a carefree guy. Actually, couldn't he have just finished slower so that he could keep me company for a while longer?

I sighed, and stared at my worksheet again, but because of the shooting sounds right next to me, I honestly couldn't concentrate at all.

What was that about "finishing faster"? Wasn't this having the complete opposite effect by distracting me?

I glared at him, hoping to drive him away, but as usual, he wasn't paying attention to me at all, and my anger quickly faded away.

Having lost all motivation to do my work, I rested my chin in my hand and rolled my mechanical pencil around, and suddenly, I thought of a good idea. Sitting up, I reached into my bag on the side of the desk and took out my headphones.

..... If I put this on and put on a brusque attitude, then he might become impatient and stop playing the game.

When people immerse themselves in their own world and other people around them start doing something, they can't help but feel very lonely. It would be the same for this guy.

Putting on my headphones, I plugged the end of the cord into the mobile phone in my pocket.

Although I tried to think of what I should listen to, there wasn't any music in particular that I wanted to hear, so I simply turned on the radio feature, and as expected, background music that would suit afternoon teatime started playing.

Just like that, I faced away from Haruka, and laying my head on my desk, I closed my eyes and listened to the radio.

If I did this, Haruka would notice and probably try to talk to me. And when he did, I'd tell him, "I'm busy listening to the radio right now, so tell me later."

It was my perfect strategy. Confident of this, I grinned.

.... But, even as some time passed, Haruka didn't try talking to me.

For the first few minutes, I assured myself, "Well, just a little longer, and he'll say something," and didn't turn to face Haruka.

However, after several more minutes, I began losing to the weakness of my own impatience.

.... Slow. Too slow.

I was no longer listening to the music from the radio, and was now fighting against my own desire to turn around.

After about twenty minutes, I had all-too-soon reached my limit.

“Ah, ahhh~ This is so boring~ I wonder if I should just go home now~”

Even though this was the last of my willpower, I muttered this without turning around.

I was gradually starting to feel ashamed of how immature I was being.

Damn it. Why did I have to think of these things for that guy?

And he was one to blame, too. It was too cruel of him to continue to ignore me even after so much time had passed.

Or was it because I was just that unappealing ....?

As I thought that, I became uneasy for some reason, and wanted to see what Haruka was doing if he still hadn't tried speaking to me.

On a sudden impulse, I forgot my willpower and sat up. Taking off my headphones, I faced in Haruka's direction.

“Hey! ..... Haruka?”

After I took off my headphones, the world without music was filled only with the background music of the game.

The shooting sounds had stopped, and I couldn't hear the sound of the controller being moved.

—Haruka's hands lay limp, and with his head drooped and hanging downwards .....  
He was silent.

“H-Haruka!”

Right away, I could tell that something wasn't right. Jumping up from my chair, I shook Haruka's body.

However, he didn't respond; the shoulders I touched were cold, very cold. It was like his mind and soul had gone off somewhere, and only his body was left behind.

My mind went completely blank. My knees started shaking, and tears started forming out of fear.

"No ..... this—this can't be .....! S-someone!! Is there someone here!?"

While supporting Haruka's limp body, I shouted in the direction of the door that faced the hallway.

However, there was no reply. During summer vacation, even with the fact that there were few people at school, with where this classroom was located, it was unlikely that there would be anyone around.

"Please, someone .... Anyone, please help .....!!"

I could no longer make sensible decisions. All I could do was hold onto Haruka's unconscious body and tremble.

If I let go now, I'd never be able to reach him again, and it felt like he'd go somewhere far away.

"Please, God .....!"

The moment I prayed, the door of the classroom was thrown open.

A familiar man in a white coat came towards me and muttered, "It's alright," and

—Slowly wrapped his arms around Haruka.

\*

It was tense in the hospital's waiting room.

Occasionally, we would hear the running footsteps of the nurses, and every time, my shoulders would shake.

Haruka had been taken to the General Hospital that had been built on a hill several months earlier.

Tateyama-sensei and I were the only ones sitting on the long bench in front of the emergency room.

The handkerchief I clutched was already soaking wet, but even so, tears continued to spill from both of my eyes.

“..... Sensei .... Haruka .... He’ll wake up, won’t he? .... He’ll be well again, won’t he?”

I had asked Tateyama-sensei this question so many times already.

I knew that it would probably only be a bother to him.

But even so, Tateyama-sensei smiled and said, “He’s doing his best too, so I’m sure it’ll be fine,” and patted my back.

Before, when I’d been hospitalized in a hospital somewhere, had my grandmother felt just like this as she sat in the waiting room?

It was like walking through an unending tunnel while looking down.

“It’ll be fine.”

Even though I tried telling myself this, the fear wouldn’t go away, and I couldn’t help but imagine the worst outcome.

If only I had realized sooner at that time, something like this might not have happened.

Because of my own stupid pride, Haruka might have been suffering all on his own.

Up until the point that he’d lost consciousness, Haruka might have been seeking help from me.

But I had ..... I had .....!

I had never hated myself as much as I did now.

The tears that fell on the hand that was holding handkerchief made me realize that they had formed into droplets.

—That's right. If I was so useless, I had no right to be by Haruka's side, or even any right to worry about him.

What would I say to him when he woke up?

Something like, "I'm glad you're alright, I was so worried"?

The only one important to me was myself. Pretending like I always thought about him only in times like these, and thinking that I could just smooth it over and settle everything just like that.

If Tateyama-sensei hadn't rushed over when he had, I wouldn't have been able to do anything.

I'm just that powerless; nothing but a selfish person.

The lit sign for the emergency room turned off.

The automatic doors opened, and the doctor assigned to Haruka came out wearing surgical robes.

Tateyama-sensei stood up, rushed up to the doctor and started having some kind of conversation with him, but I could no longer even move due to my anxiety and fear.

I couldn't catch what they were saying, either, and simply watched as they spoke.

".... I see. Please .... I'll leave the rest in your hands."

Tateyama-sensei bowed his head. The doctor muttered two or three words, and disappeared down the hall.

"S-Sensei .... Is Haruka ....?!"

Remaining sitting and with my head still cloudy, I grasped at the hem of Tateyama-sensei's white coat. When I asked this, he answered with a slightly relieved expression.

".... It seems that he's still sleeping right now, but he only barely made it."

Tateyama-sensei dropped down in the seat next to me.

The sweat beading on his forehead rolled down onto the collar of his white coat.

Just hearing that made my heart calm down.

Haruka was alive. Just knowing that alone made me so happy that nothing else mattered.

But, as I suddenly thought of Haruka's smile, I had a feeling I'd never see it again, and my chest ached severely.

.... It was possible that he no longer wanted to see me anymore.

He might have come to hate me for not doing anything in his time of pain.

If he woke up today, what kind of face would he make when he looked at me?

I couldn't help but feel very, very afraid as I thought of this.

"..... Sensei, I'm ... going to get Haruka's things ...."

"Hm? Ahh, now that I think about it, we left his wallet and phone and everything behind ..... Wait, are you alright going by yourself?"

"I'll be fine .... Sensei, if Haruka wakes up, please stay by his side."

As I said this, I stood up and headed for the hospital exit.

What was I running away from? Anyway, I just had to get away from here.

The moment I left the exit at the end of the hall, my body was enveloped by the lukewarm air outside.

Although I felt like crying again once I was by myself, I put on the headphones that were hanging around my neck and walked without looking back.

\*

By the time I arrived at the school, it was already completely evening.

Compared to the daytime, the cries of the cicadas had lessened, and the temperature had also dropped, for the most part.

However, perhaps because I'd come in a hurry, the shirt of my uniform was sweaty, and clung to my back.

Changing into my indoor shoes and exiting into the corridor, I faced towards the right-hand side of the hallway that led to the classroom.

Compared to earlier, the school was even quieter than before. After just one more hour, it would probably become completely dark here.

Come to think of it, it'd already been a year since that day of the Culture Festival, when this very same hallway had been flooded with crowds of people.

Weird fans had gathered and along with a meeting with ghost-like girl, that day had really been a complete uproar. Haruka became addicted to an online game from that day on, and the fact that I made my first female friend, was also because of that day. And ....

"Ah, Takane-san, it's been a while. What's wrong?"

I was stopped by someone suddenly calling out to me, and I removed my headphones.

When I turned around, there stood a girl that was wearing a red scarf, despite it being a midsummer day.

"Ahh, Ayano-chan. Long time so see. Wait, why are you at school?"

When I asked this, Ayano uttered a quiet "Well ...." accompanied with a bashful gesture.

For a moment, I didn't understand the meaning of that, but when I thought about it, Ayano didn't do any extracurricular activities, so there could be only one reason that she'd come to school.

"... Could it be that Ayano-chan also has summer courses? Even though you're a first year?"

"Yes, that's right, because my grades are really quite bad ...."

Ayano faced in the other direction and let out a strange laugh.

I wondered if Ayano's grades had really become so bad since the last time I'd seen her.

"... That seems like a pain. I feel you."

"Ah, by the way, my father said that Takane-san is also taking summer courses, if I remember ....?"

... That teacher really talked about unnecessary things way too much. It was not okay to think it's fine to say anything, just because it was to your own daughter.

"W-well, how about let's just not talk about that? Since it'll just be depressing for both of us .... Ah, by the way, that guy isn't around today?"

I glanced around, looking to see that the person with that unpleasant attitude wasn't here.

However, it seemed that my hint wasn't missed.

"Do you mean Shintaro? No, he's really smart, so for him to be taking summer courses ...."

The moment that the topic of Shintaro was brought up, the tone of Ayano's voice went up a little. She was a downright easy-to-understand girl.

"Ahh, right, he's smart. It must be a pain for you, right, Ayano-chan? Having to look after that selfish guy. "

"Eh~? That's not true. Once you try talking to him, he's a surprisingly good guy. He's just a little shy."

Ayano said this and broke into a bright smile.

Ahh, this girl was going to have some problems in the future because of her personality. I could only see him as a selfish brat, but to her, she seemed to see it as a cute point.

"I see. Well, it'd be nice if he was a bit more polite ..... Honestly. Having a girl like Ayano-chan around, he must be a spoiled and happy guy."

The moment I said this, for some reason, Ayano's expression clouded over slightly.

Had I possibly said something that I shouldn't have?

Although that hadn't been my intention at all.

".... No, I'm no good for him. He needs someone that's even more selfish than him, someone energetic to pull him along .... All I do is just follow behind him all the time. I can't do anything ...."

Ayano let out an awkward laugh and scratched her head. No, wait just a minute, there couldn't possibly exist in this world a person that was more selfish than that guy. An egoistical, ill-tempered, and elusive guy that seems to be hiding something. .... Wait—?

"There isn't~ ....."

"Eh? Did you say something?"

"Ah, oh, no!! It's nothing!! I was just talking to myself! Anyway, Ayano-chan, sorry for holding you up. You have to be heading home soon, don't you?"

I waved my hand in a gesture to shoo her off.

"Ahh, no, it was nice being able to talk to you. That's true ... I was already thinking of going home, so if you are as well, should we go home together, Takane-san?"

"Ah, well .... Today, Haruka kind of collapsed, you see. Sensei is with him at the hospital, so I have to go and bring him his things ....."

After I'd said this, Ayano gasped slightly and lowered her head.

"I-I apologize! I stopped you without knowing about that. You have to go as soon as possible, right? Is Haruka-san's condition alright ....."

"Ah, no, it's fine! He still hasn't regained consciousness, but it doesn't seem life-threatening, and as long as Sensei is there, he'll be fine. And ... even if I go back, I'll just be a burden, so ...."

Those words that I ended up casually blurting out came out sounding terribly self-depreciating, and somehow, my chest began to hurt.

Why did I end up saying something like that? It had nothing to do with Ayano.

".... Takane-san, did something happen? I'm sure that Haruka-san wouldn't think that you're a burden."

"Yeah .... but it's no good. I don't know how to face him ... That's why, if I can, I want to just give his things to the receptionist and go home ...."

I couldn't make up my mind. That wasn't what I really wanted to do.

I looked up, and saw that Ayano had a look that was different than her usual gentle one. Her cheeks were slightly bloated, and she had an almost angry expression.

It was my first time seeing her with that face, and it shocked me.

"Takane-san. You're not being honest enough with your feelings. Even though you've decided what you want to do, you're scared, so you're just making it Haruka-san's fault, aren't you?"

Being stared down by Ayano, I lost the mental battle.

"N-no, that's not ...."

"No, that's exactly it. When you see Haruka-san, you should speak to him honestly. Also ...."

As if remembering something, Ayano trailed off and made a melancholic face.

Before speaking her next words, she took a small, deep breath.

".... Even when you want to say something, there are times when you won't have the chance to. However, if it's now, you'll definitely be able to tell him your true feelings. So please find the courage to."

After saying this, the usual gentle expression returned to Ayano's face.

"Ayano-chan ...."

"Well, if you get rejected, I'll be here to comfort you! I'll be excusing myself here, then."

I'd fallen into a bit of a depressed mood, but my face became hot from Ayano's words and those feelings were blown away.

I was too embarrassed to immediately give a response, and Ayano had already left towards the direction of the shoe cupboards.

"Wh-wha ..... ah .... She sure told me ...."

Ayano disappeared from view. My shoulders slumped, and once more, I began to walk towards the Science Preparation Room.

.... My true feelings.

Because I was so used to cheating myself about them, even I wasn't sure what they were anymore.

It was too difficult for me. I didn't know what I wanted to do.

If we could just continue to spend time together in the same classroom as we had been doing, that would have been fine.

If so, then wouldn't it be fine to just not say anything that would make things complicated, and simply stay as we had been?

— — In my heart, that kind of conflict unfolded.

Yes, this was the same as how it always was.

I've always done this, without saying anything, and been together with him in this way until now.

But, was it really alright like this ....?

As I thought of this, the door of the Science Preparation Room came into view.

Yes, when I opened this door every day, that would be the start of another nerve-wrecking day.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

"Takane, good morning."

The moment I blinked .... It felt like he was talking to me, but in the empty classroom, there was only the half-finished game and a mountain of textbooks piled on the desks.

My heart pounded loudly.

That was probably what I had been looking for.

I turned to go out into the corridor once more.

I finally understood ....!

The things that I had always wanted to say, I'd found them.

If it's now, then I can say them.

Yes, if it was now, then surely ....!

With feelings that were overflowing from my chest, I kicked my feet on the ground to go to where he was as soon as possible— —

.... At least, that's how it should have been.

Suddenly, the walls of the corridor distorted, and the floor drew up towards my face at an unbelievable momentum.

With an impact as if being slammed down, my body collapsed onto the floor.

"Ah ..... ha ..... a— .... !!"

I couldn't breathe properly.

As far as moving my body, as well, I could barely twitch my fingertips.

.... Why—Why this timing ....!

The fear that I'd forgotten began to take over my mind.

And at the same time, an unreasonable drowsiness began to take away my consciousness.

.... No. .... No!

With no way to resist, in my gradually fading consciousness,

I finally watched with both eyes, the shadow of a person standing at the end of the corridor.

— —Why was that person here?

Even though they should not have been.

Without even being able to confirm who they were, the time limit drew closer at last.

All of a sudden, I remembered Ayano's words, "Even when you want to say something, there are times when you won't have the chance to."

I really was an idiot. Even though I was just going to say something so simple, I'd taken too much time.

In my fading consciousness, until the very last moment, I continued to recite those words.

"— —Haruka, I love you."

## **Headphone Actor IV**

I wonder if my last words reached.

Although I had no way of making sure, surely, they had. I had that kind of feeling.

It was a strange sensation.

Like floating in warm water, or flying through the sky ....

Yes, a sensation like waking up from something.

My quickened breath, the pain in my legs that seemed like they would tear. Even the usual drowsiness that would irritate me .... Today, I didn't feel anything at all.

Had I died?

Could this seemingly endless darkness be the afterlife ....?

I had imagined it'd have a bit more of a fairy tale-like feeling, but unexpectedly, it seemed like even God slacked off sometimes.

At the very least, I wish He'd made a bit of light ....

"Sigh, somehow I just don't understand this at all ..... Huh? Ah! Ah~! Ah~! .... I can speak. U~hm .... hm~ My body .... is here, too."

Patting my own body all over, it was evident from my voice and body that I was properly conscious.

"Then, I wonder what this place is. It doesn't feel like I'm trapped somewhere, either ..... I wonder if I what I saw just now was some weird dream ...."

All of a sudden, the memory of my horrific experience from earlier came flooding back.

The town of agonizing cries.

The crumbling sky.

The voice of another "me" that I suddenly heard .....

Just remembering it gave me goosebumps.

And from "getting goosebumps," I realized something.

How had it become something this strange in the first place?

Although I could speak, I couldn't feel myself breathing.

Although I could touch my body, I couldn't feel a temperature.

If this was what being "dead" was like, I probably had to come to terms with it, but no matter what, I couldn't understand it.

That time, before I'd woken up in the hallway, what in the world had happened to my body?

I'd experienced this sensation several times before.

The sensation of "waking up after suddenly falling asleep."

In actuality, my memories from before I woke up in that hallway were completely missing. It was probably because I'd fainted because of my "illness," and woken up there. That was something that had happened many times before, so it wasn't such a big surprise .... but this time, the situation in which I woke up was different.

Up until now, I'd never been engulfed by this dream-like phenomenon, wandering around in the darkness.

"Nn~!! I don't get it!! Just what is this place!? Someone!?! Is there anyone here~!?!"

The moment I shouted this, although I didn't know if it was an opportunity or anything—suddenly, something like a square television screen emerged from the darkness. In it, there were an infinite number of monitors, and cables that seemed to be alive, running from the ceiling.

"U-uwaah! That scared me ... What is this? .... TV?"

When I looked at it up close, I saw that it was a dark, laboratory-like room.

Each monitor displayed some kind of parameter or time.

The square frame that I was peeking out of into this room, was probably of the the monitors in here.

But I had no way to confirm that.

The surroundings were completely dark. Looking out at this room from this square, window-like scene right now, was my only way to find out about anything.

Nevertheless, just what was that world? At that time, I was struck by the sensation that the world that had I spent my time in had crumbled like paper mache.

Even the reason I became desperate to tell someone something, in the end, I didn't understand it very well.

"Nn~ .... It's dark, so I can't see very well, but .... Someone's talking?"

Because the room was illuminated only from the glow of the display screens, what I could see was limited.

However, from this square window, although it was faint, I was able to catch some sound.

".... -ze 1 is a success for now. Ha ha .... To think that it would go well on the first attempt. It was worth taking a year to prepare."

While holding my ears attentive, the voice that I heard was of a person I knew very well.  
".... Sensei? Why is he in this kind of place ...."

When I thought to somehow confirm the owner of that voice, the position of the square window changed.

Although only slightly, the sound volume increased, and I was able to hear clearly.  
The dim room, too, as if my eyes had grown accustomed to it, gradually became brighter.  
However, what I saw there, was an unbelievable scene.

In the back of the dark room that I couldn't see well, there were large X-ray machines spread out.

Above the bed portion, there was a white circular gate installed.

There was something like a heart rate monitor with an unmoving needle, and a few buttons.  
The multiple cords extending from the gate, were attached to every part of the body lying on the bed, as if to connect it to something.

"That's ..... m-me .....!?"

The human was clearly me. She was wearing something like white hospital clothes, and on her head, some kind of machine that looked like headphones.

"Wh-what does this mean!? But I'm—even though I'm right here ....!"

Just then, I gasped.

Could it possibly mean that I'd "become a ghost"?

That fact was that my consciousness was here, but my body was unmistakably lying on that bed.

Which would mean ....

"Could it be, that I really died ....? Seriously ....?"

I was petrified with terror at this much-too-shocking sight.

And although it was useless, I realized here that "I could be petrified with terror."

To think that I, myself, had become one of the "ghosts" that I refused to believe in.

That girl that came to the school culture festival might have actually been a real ghost, then.

No, didn't that boy say it was a supernatural power?

No matter which one, both were paranormal phenomenon that I wasn't convinced of.

But surprisingly, I retained a presence of mind.

I had died, but I hadn't ceased existing.

Thinking clearly about it in this way, I could recognize things, and there was no denying

that I was existed here.

“.... But what should I do from now? Earlier, I heard Sensei’s voice, so he must be here somewhere, but isn’t there some way to get his attention and have him help me ...?”

Once again, I began to restlessly observe the inside of the room. Although I think what I heard earlier was more to the right ....

Taking note of this, I pressed my face against the square screen and looked to the right as much as I could.

When I did, in the back of the room, there was something I hadn’t been able to see because it had been in a blind spot, but could now see clearly.

There was a huge aquarium ... no, some kind of huge container filled with formalin, and standing in front of it was Sensei’s figure. However, rather than the figure of Sensei, who I had been searching for, I was more shocked by the figure of a human inside of that container.

“Ha-Haruka ....!?”

For a moment, I thought it was Haruka, but the appearance was different from the Haruka that I knew.

Like me who was on top of the bed, with tubes connected to his body, floating underwater without looking up .... was a youth with white hair and pale pink-colored eyes.

“Isn’t that the ‘Konoha’ that Haruka made ....? B-but why ....!?”

As one thing led to another, in this unrealistic situation, I already couldn’t think properly.

Why was I dead?

Why was Konoha in there?

And why was Sensei ....?



Unable to organize my thoughts, once again, I heard Sensei's voice from the square window.

"At any rate, I've acquired the "key." With this, the next 'Heat-Haze Daze' can be opened. Konoha .... you are still ...."

That was as far as I heard when a large sandstorm ran across the screen. Wondering what had happened and hitting my hand against the screen, a pale light projected from my hand's silhouette, almost like block noise, and I saw my begin to collapse starting from the edge.

"Eek- .....! U-uwaaaa!! Wh-what is this!? My body is ....!"

The next moment, all the infinite screens on the other side of the square window displayed the word, "DELETE."

"De ... derete!? ..... Teheh☆"

Just as instructed, thinking it could be nothing other than this, I did my best to try and be dere.

—However, the situation didn't change in the slightest. Then what was it, that instruction just now ....!?

"Gyaaaa!! Nothing happened!! Aaaah, my legs are disappearing .....!! M-my chest is .... well, I never had one to start with, though ...."

It was like I was in a dream, with my body disappearing. I didn't understand this at all anymore.

This probably meant I was going to disappear. There was no mistake. When I opened my eyes, I probably wouldn't be at home in bed, on the verge of being late. .... No, I probably wouldn't.

While thinking of such a stupid thing, my body was already on the verge of completely disappearing.

Helpless, I muttered, "God!" but in the moment after that vain effort—

It become completely dark.

".... How pitiful, little girl. You have lost your body, what meaning do you have to survive now?"

Aah, so I really had lost my body .... that was just what I'd thought.

"A place to return to, or even a place to stay, you don't have anywhere."

If that's the case, then ... then I'll make one. No matter what kind of place it is, I can just make it my place.

"A rather arrogant girl, aren't you? Before you even attempt that, do you want to escape from here?"

W-well of course! If I stay here, I won't know what to do ....

".... If you want to escape, then open your 'eyes' ..... little girl."

—Eh!? .... Anyway, who are you?

The moment I thought to ask, my eyes suddenly became hot like they were burning. And at the same time, lighting bolts ran across the darkened world.

The first thing that caught my eye, right in front of me—a log-in screen had appeared.

To me, that was the most familiar scene.

"—I see, so it's like this. Then .... first, I have to find a place to stay. If possible, it'd be nice if it's not a boring place."

I typed my password into the log-in screen with a familiar speed.

"WELCOME"

With a completely refreshed feeling, I dove into the sea of character strings. The blue compass began to vigorously spin, and in the wide sky of 0 and 1's, lightning birds flew about.

—From here, my long, long, cyber journey began.

## **Reminiscence Forest**

August 15<sup>th</sup>, a midsummer day.

On the street a short distance away from the urban area, the sounds of people and cars grew distant and quiet, and in their place, the cries of cicadas rang out noisily.

Only rusty street signs and small, private homes dotted the seemingly endless street.

And as if it wasn't already enough that the pavement was full of noticeable cracks, the side of the sidewalk was overgrown with weeds.

It was most likely already past noon. Although it felt like I'd been walking on this road for hours, the fact was that only a few minutes had passed.

In my previous experiences with stressful situations that I often found myself in, I knew for a fact that time seemed to stretch out longer than it really did.

—It all began yesterday.

I, Kisaragi Shintaro, after living the life of a shut-in for nearly two years, was suddenly thrust into the outside world.

If you were to ask why, the reason was quite simple: the malicious virus, Ene, and broken some parts for my computer in an act of violence, and I had gone to a nearby department store to buy replacements.

However, with the probability of one in several thousand chances, I encountered a "terrorist attack" at that department store, was held hostage, and on top of all that, shot with a gun.

... If you don't even believe my story up until this point, it might be dangerous to go on, but from here it's the main plot. Allow me to continue.

After being shot by a gun, I was saved by a strange group that was there at the crime scene.

An invisible person, a Medusa, and even a chameleon boy that belonged to a group called "Mekakushi Dan."

.... Clearly, this organization was even more suspicious than the terrorists, but since they had tended to my injury and taken care of me while I was unconscious, they didn't seem to be bad people.

—Up until this point, it was still fine.

While suppressing various emotions the best I could, and parting ways with a “Thank you very much, I'll be going now,” I fully intended to go back home and indulge in a hikineet lifestyle once more, and in doing so, forget about all the questions that I had.

However, the boy named Kano began casually talking on his own, and when I went along with the flow, and said, “Oh, I see, so that's how it is,” he told me, “We can't allow you to leave now that you've learned our secret.” It was as if this had all been according to his plan.

—Naturally, I objected.

I was thankful to them for taking care of while I'd been unconscious overnight.

But obviously, I didn't plan to be so compliant, and both my psyche and body felt tattered and ill from the shock of leaving my room for the first time in so long.

But if I were to tell anyone about that kind of crazy thing, there was no mistake that I would be told, “You're the one that's crazy.”

That's why there was no way I could reveal it to anyone. Absolutely not.

.... However, my pest of a virus, Ene responded in an easy-to-understand way, saying, “This has turned into a very interesting development, Master!” and together with my confidential information, joined Mekakushi Dan.

With my desperate protests being in vain, I also very reluctantly forced to join Mekakushi Dan, and had now obtained the position of Mekakushi Dan No. 7, Shintaro.

“Mom, I made friends! I joined something called Mekakushi Dan! I'm No. 7! .... Eh? How old am I? Oh Mom, did you forget? I'm eighteen!”

—I wanted to die. I really wanted to die. There was no way I would say that.

“Hey, Onii-chan, just from the looks of it, you seem like you’re boiling .... And those clothes don’t look good on you at all, either.”

As I was engaging in my solo monologue inside of my head, my little sister, Momo, who had been walking beside me, started nagging me.

This year, my little sister, who was younger than me by two years, turned sixteen. A long time ago .... No, it was really only just a few years ago at this point, she used to be my cute little sister that would sweetly call me, “Onii-chan, Onii-chan.”

Just as she entered high school, her attitude towards me went through an abrupt change.

She began to take on that overbearing attitude that was common amongst high school girls.

Furthermore, although I thought that it had to be some kind of mistake, she had become an idol, and had gained considerable popularity, enough that there were posters of her posted up around the city.

I’d been happy about my sister’s breakthrough, but as the gap between us widened, recently we’d lost the chance to talk much.

However, her idol activities seemed to have been rather stressful for her, and after having a talk with her agency yesterday, she’d been let on vacation for the time being.

Although she didn’t have many friends, she had made some new ones within Mekakushi Dan, and as an older brother, I found myself feeling a bit worried.

“—I said hey. It’s already soaked in sweat, so just take it off. I’m not trying to compete with you with who can hold out longer.”

It was true that with this heat, and this amount of sweat, the inside of my jersey had become like a sauna.

It might have been a good idea to take it off but I had delicate skin, so I didn’t want to get sunburned. Also, for me, who was captivated by this supremely fashionably item known as a “jersey” in clothing culture, I couldn’t possibly do such a thing.

The reason I was so attached to it was because a friend of mine (female) had once complimented me, saying, “Shintaro-kun, that jersey really suits you,” but right now, that compliment might actually be some kind of curse.

“He~eey~ .... Onii-chan! Are you listening!? You look like you’re boiling, I said!”

Listening to her relentlessly throwing complaints at me, she was using it as a way to vent her frustration towards the heat and her own fatigue.

I understood how she felt, because I was in the exact same position. I was soon growing annoyed, so I went along with my sister’s provocations.

“It’s not even bothering me much, anyway. Anyway, you’re one to talk, with those clothes .... It looks you’re taking part in some punishment game for a variety show.”

The parka that Momo was wearing had the words, “national isolation” printed in large font across her chest, and was so unfashionable that not even an entertainer would wear it.

If other people saw it, they’d most likely misunderstand, thinking, “Ah, this person has committed a rather serious crime ...”

“*What?* Not being able to see the cuteness of this shirt .... As I thought, Onii-chan has no sense at all! Anyway, what about you with your jersey? Do you plan to do a hitchhiker project as a comedian? Like going to some farm somewhere, and crying over the deliciousness of vegetables.”

It was apparent that Momo liked that shirt to considerable degree, judging from the sharpness of her retort. However, in order to defend the dignity of this jersey, I couldn’t lose here.

I would have to use my trump card: Momo’s weakness.

“Shut up. I know about how you watch video gameplay videos by yourself every night. That’s really gross. Eating fried squid, and with the lights in your room turned off. Are you some old man?”

Not expecting me to use this as a retort, Momo began to show an even greater impatience.

“How .... How!? How do you know about that!?”

Momo's confident expression faded away in a moment, and her pale face was now gradually becoming redder.

As if to deepen the wound, I continued.

"Nah, it's just that when I was going to going to the bathroom, I passed by your room and heard a weird laugh, like 'Heh ..... heheh .....'. Your door was halfway open, too, so I could see inside."

When I finished talking, Momo had taken a silent stance.

I had won. After all, she was my little sister. She was no match for her older brother.

"You're ... you're the *worst*!! I can't believe you!! Anyway, Onii-chan, you're the one that watches dirty videos all the time, don't you!? Ene-chan told me!! "Master's libido doesn't seem to have any limits," she said! Isn't that embarrassing!?"

In just one turn, I fell from my elation of winning the battle into the deepest abyss. The sweat from the heat was quickly replaced by a rush of cold sweat.

"Wh-wh-what are you saying .....!?"

"It's all true though, isn't it!?"

"Wh-what do you mean it's all— .....!? Oh, ohhh~ I see. You mean that time I accidentally clicked that weird ad, right!? Everyone makes that kind of mistake at least once!"

"Oh? And just how many times do you make that mistake in a day? Ene-chan told me, "Master leaves his room looking nervous quite often" ....."

An emergency alarm started going off full blast in my head.

There was no mistake that the life of I, Kisaragi Shintaro, was in grave danger! I wanted to take out the phone that was in my pocket and throw it into the gutter as soon as possible, but what mattered most now was changing the subject. Momo was looking at me as if I were a piece of trash right now, but there had to still be a chance somewhere.

There must be something .....

"Seems like you're having a really interesting conversation!! As expected of brother and sister, you two get along great!"

"Ouch!"

Suddenly, someone slapped my back and I jumped in surprise.

Turning around quickly, a well-built young man, wearing green overalls and carrying something white and fluffy on his back, was facing this way with a crisp smile on his face.

This young man belonged to the Mekakushi Dan that I had joined.

Come to think of, this guy had been walking behind us the whole time. Which meant that he should have been able to hear what our conversation was really about .... Could it be that he was trying to rescue me from being accused by my sister?

".... You're .... Uh, was it Zetto-san?"

My attempt to spark up a conversation by saying the name I remembered was a failure. It didn't sound right, and as if to confirm that, Momo's elbow jutted into my side.

Accompanied with a groan, the wind was knocked right out of me.

"He's Setto-san! Weren't we just introduced this morning!? Geez, Onii-chan, you're really bad at remembering peoples' names ...!"

Momo glared at me for my rudeness. However, just as she was about to continue lecturing, we heard a discontent voice from the white, fluffy thing on the overall-guy's back.



".... That's wrong too, it's Seto ...."

Over the shoulder of the boy named Seto, only a pair of pink eyes peeked out.

The owner of the fluffy and white long hair, Mary, continued the correction with a scowl.

"It's Seto .... How would you feel ... if someone called you by the wrong name?"

Being subjected to Mary's intense stare, Momo took on a startled expression.

I saw her glance over at me for a moment.

"Hahahaha! It's fine, Mary! Doesn't Setto sound cool?"

Seto comforted her with a completely carefree attitude.

Still pouting, Mary buried her face in Seto's shoulder and fell silent once more.

A moment of silence passed .... Ignoring that, Momo tried to increase her walking speed, but I wouldn't allow it.

"..... Oi."

With an annoyed air, I drew closer to Momo. It was only natural. After even being elbowed, the name she had corrected me with had been completely off. Anyone would be mad.

"What was up with that, huh?"

"Y-you're the one that messed up! At least I was a little closer ...."

"It's not about who was closer or not!! What was that, huh!? *Setto*?"

Watching us having this petty argument, Seto burst into hearty laughter.

Although I'd only met him this morning, he didn't seem to have a bad side, or rather, he seemed to have a generosity that allowed him to simply accept anything that came his way.

Once Seto started laughing it off, we realized what a meaningless argument we were having, and a great embarrassment swept over us.

"Ohh .... Seto-san, we're sorry for getting your name wrong .. And Mary-chan, sorry for putting you in a bad mood ...."

Turning around to face the two of them, Momo apologized.

Raising her face from Seto's shoulder, Mary muttered, "... I guess Setto sounds a little cool, too."

Hearing this, Momo let out a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, you're pretty good at carrying someone around in this damned heat."

"Eh? Ah, I carry things at my part-time job all the time, so this is completely fine. Mary's light, so it's no sweat!"

It was clear that Seto was in good shape.

Especially compared to my thin arms, accustomed to these two years of being a home security guard, I could barely lift a baby, let alone a girl.

In the corner of my vision, I saw Momo look at us each in turn and laugh through her nostrils, but I would pretend I hadn't seen that. Yeah.

"But Mary, if you don't exercise day-to-day, you'll get tired right away, just like today."

"O-okay .... I'll start talking short walks from now on ...."

Just a few minutes after leaving the house, Mary had become too tired to walk, and was being carried by Seto ever since.

It seemed that this girl usually didn't go out very often.

I felt an inexplicable sense of connection with her, but between a sheltered girl and a HIKINEET, the difference between the two was as great as the sky and the earth. .... It was regrettable.

The voices of the cicadas that cried at everything around them grew noisier.

We'd probably come a long distance from the urban area of the city by now.

Beside the sidewalk, small-scale forests were beginning to appear, and for the most part, there were no longer many houses.

We'd really only been walking for a rather short period of time, but for it to already look so much like the countryside ...? I'd thought so yesterday, but once again, I found the rate at which the urban development had progressed was strange.

Due to being drenched in tea yesterday, Momo's somewhat-old cell phone seemed to be balancing on the line between life and death. However, it seemed that after putting it in her bag along with some drying agent, it'd been resurrected.

"But I'm really sorry, everyone. Because of me, we have to walk ...."

Looking downwards, Momo muttered this.

It was true that it would have been faster if we'd gone by bus, however, Kido's "eye concealing" power had a weakness: when coming in contact with another person, the effect of the power would wear off. Therefore, using it in a crowded space like the inside of a bus would be too much of a risk. Which was why we had to walk.

At first, the plan for today had been, "Let's go to the rooftop amusement park at the department store where we went shopping yesterday!" However, due to the terrorist incident yesterday, the department store wasn't likely to be open, so that plan was a bust.

However, due to Ene selfishly saying, "I want to go *now*!" We had found an amusement park on the city outskirts to go to as an alternative.

The leader, Kido, along with one other member, Kano, were going to be running a little late, so currently, I was heading towards the amusement park with the remaining members.

If it was Momo, she always used streets that that few others travelled by, so this path in particular was safe, and void of people.

".... Kano-san said, 'The amusement park is pretty much in the middle of the forest park,' but ... Wait, isn't that it over there!? Look! I can see a ferris wheel!"

With a gasp, Momo pointed to the front-right.

A large forest spread out ahead, and in between the groves of trees, glimpses of things like the rails for the roller coaster were indeed visible.

"Oh, sure looks like it! Look, Mary, we're here!"

Shaking Mary side-to-side gently on his back, Mary raised her head, eyes sparkling.  
“You’re right—! Wow, amazing!”

“Come to think of it, Ene-chan’s been rather quiet. She hasn’t talked at all since earlier. Is she okay?”

“She doesn’t want to waste the battery. She said, ‘Tell me when we get there!’”

I had thought that she would be screaming and making a lot of noise today, just like she did every other day. However, the weakness that she had was actually a pretty surprising thing.

“I see. We’d better wake her up soon, then ..... Ah! That might be the leader.”

About 40 meters ahead, under the large sign that read, “Natural Amusement Park,” there was a stop for the shuttle. From within the families filing out of the parked bus, there were two people that I recognized.

“It really is! Uwawah, so many people got off ....! I’ll try calling them!”

Momo pulled up her hood quickly, and began to speak into her phone.

“Ah, hello, Leader? We’re already close to the gate .... Yes! That’s right. We’ll be waiting here. Thank you!”

Ending the call, Momo looked around at the surroundings. The people that had gotten off the bus showed no sign of coming towards us, and instead were drawn towards the entrance of the amusement park.

In the midst of that, we saw the two from earlier walking in our direction.

“So, basically, with Kido’s power, we’ll be able to enjoy and have fun at the amusement park .... right?”

“Yep! That’s exactly it!”

With an almost child-like smile, Momo peered out from under her hood.

\*

—Completely out of breath, I found a bench and sat down on it.

Because of the shade provided by the overgrown trees, I felt a cool sensation from the sweat on my back.

I breathed heavily. The pounding in my ears still hadn't gone back to normal .... Even now, I still felt as nauseous as if I was riding on a ship, and felt like throwing up again.

"Shintaro-san, are you okay? Mary and them got too carried away, riding the roller coaster the moment we got here ...."

Seto sat down on my right side, offered me a water bottle and rubbed my back.

"Really, Shintaro-kun, kuku .... I really think it'd be okay if you just didn't worry about it so much. Fufu ...."

Kano sat down my left side, folded both arms behind his head and began poking at me in this malicious manner.

"Kano, that's rude. There are people that are bad with thrill rides. He even threw up a little, so you shouldn't make him feel bad."

"Please .... Please don't remind me ... I'm begging you ...."

Even Seto's good-hearted warning became something that inflicted damage to my mentality by putting the fact "I threw up" into words. I wanted to die.

"Ah, sorry, sorry. It's just that Shintaro-kun is so easy to pick on. Anyway, Mary's surprisingly good with thrill rides. As expected, Kido's face was twitching the whole time, though."

At those words, the memory of the girls' faces resurfaced, and my shame increased even further. They'd seen me at my worst. I couldn't take it anymore.

"That's because Kido wanted to look cool. But it's nice to be able to hang out with this many people."

Seto concluded this matter-of-factly, still rubbing my back the entire time.

Was it such a nice thing? Because of it, I'd become the vomiting man.

"That's true. This is definitely a first. But anyway, hey, you seem like you have it tough with part-time jobs every day, Seto. Didn't you come home late yesterday, too?"

"Yeah. ... And on top of that, when I came back yesterday, there were suddenly so many people, so I was surprised!"

"Come to think about it, Mary was the last person to join, so how many years has it been since then? Kido seems really happy that we have more members now, too, so isn't it great? By the way, what do you think about Kisaragi-chan, Seto?"

Above my bowed back, Seto and Kano seemed to be having a pleasant conversation, but as the topic switched to Momo, I remembered her cold looks and really didn't feel like joining in.

"She's a really nice and polite girl! I was surprised that Mary was the one who introduced her, when she's usually so shy. But to think that she's an idol!"

"Ah, Kido was really shocked when she brought her in. Kido's panicked face .... kuku"

While Kano seemed to be really enjoying himself, even now, I felt like crying.

"Ah, also, Ene-chan! That girl has a really interesting personality~ But I wonder how that works. Where's she moving from?"

"From the cell phone! Hmmm ... Somehow, it looks like she really lives inside the cell phone, but ..."

As soon as the conversation shifted to Ene, tears overflowed from my eyes. Surely, that person wouldn't forget about how stupid I'd make myself look earlier. She'd probably hold it against me until I was in my grave.

"It really does look like she lives inside the phone. Hey, Shintaro-kun, how does that work? ..... Wait, why are you crying!?"

No matter how you looked at it, when Kano peered at my face, the expression on his own face seemed to say, "I've come across something rea~lly interesting!" He really was a malicious guy.



The hand that was rubbing my back casually was also really gross.

“Sh-shut up! I’m not crying!! .... So, what was that about Ene?”

Switching gears, I addressed Kano’s question. .... If I involved myself in the conversation like this, there was a chance that my mood would improve.

“Eh? Ah! Yeah, yeah, Ene-chan! How did you meet that girl!? Was it from that thing that’s popular nowadays? A dating site!?”

“As if! I don’t really get it, but it seems like she’s been living in the computer since before we met ..... I don’t know where she came from, or who she is exactly, and she won’t tell me whenever I ask, either.”

Although my reply didn’t answer the question at all, Kano nodded as if he understood.

“I see~ So that’s how it is. In other words, Shintaro-kun kept persistently asking about Ene-chan’s private past until she got angry, and then ....”

“No! Where’d you come up with that!? I didn’t say anything like that at all! Anyway, I don’t really care about the past. It’s not like I even want to talk about it ....”

I’d try to explain it to him, but Kano only chuckled and hit my back, going, “I’m joking, I’m joking!”

Ah, this sensation was probably *that*. The common case of “joining a club without thinking, but the senpai in that club is extremely annoying and you feel like quitting as soon as possible.”

“Well, well, fighting is bad, either way. .... Ah, Shintaro-san, you don’t have any water left! I’ll go buy you some more!”

Only when Seto said so did I notice that the water bottle I was holding had become mostly empty.

“Oh, no, I don’t want to trouble you, so I’ll go myself ....”

I felt bad being catered to, but as I made to get up from the bench, Seto pushed me back down by my shoulders.

“It’s fine, it’s fine! Please take your time resting! I wanted to buy something to drink myself, anyway!”

With a bright smile like you'd see in a soft drink commercial, Seto walked off at a brisk pace.

"Ah! Wait ... let me give you money to ...."

"You can pay me back later!" Waving his hand, Seto disappeared into the crowds of people.

"Seto just never settles down, does he?"

Yawning, Kano folded his arms behind his head again.

I also kept quiet without making much effort to start a conversation. If I brought something up, this guy would just use that as a spark to talk on and on. Honestly, I found that to be extremely annoying, so I wanted to avoid communication with him as much as possible.

Speaking of which, I remembered how I'd become a hostage with this guy yesterday and sat near him.

Even in that kind of critical situation, Kano had been just as relaxed as he was right now.

When I talked to Momo about it, it seemed that everyone in this "Mekakushi Dan" was younger than me.

After all, saying something like, "Let's all go to the amusement park!" *did* seem fairly childish.

However, hearing about how they'd taken down the terrorists at the department store, and about the "power" that they each possessed, made me think of them as not simply being some group that fooled around.

—In the first place, what did this group do? And why was it formed?

Before Mary joined, this group consisted of only three members: Kido, Seto, and Kano.

Including me, there were currently seven members. Other than me, all of the members held “some kind of power.”

The members generally followed the leader, Kido.

This was all I knew.

Ene and Momo, in particular, didn’t seem to care much about the activities of this group, but those two were the most “abnormal” ones that lacked the ability to function properly in normal society.

Putting it like that, I came to think about how “joining a mysterious group and opening up to them without knowing anything” to be a slightly dangerous thing.

It had only been for a short period of time, but from my interactions with them so far, they didn’t seem to be bad people.

I hadn’t been able to do anything about Momo’s “power,” but these people had cared and been able to sympathize with her as friends.

I didn’t want to consider so much that it was for their own benefit, or they were possibly involved in some kind of criminal activities.

However, I was unclear on the details and reasons on why they had that “power.”

By the time Momo noticed she had one, she was already catching people’s eyes, and neither she, nor I, knew when it had begun or what the cause was.

But, from the way that these guys talked, they seemed to know the true meaning behind this “power.”

If that was really so, then honestly, who exactly were these people ...?

“Here! Shintaro-san, I’ve brought your water!”

Just as I was in my utmost serious mode trying to unravel the mystery of these guys, Seto came back with the water bottle he’d bought and pressed it against my neck.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!! Geez!! Y-you .... Can’t you read the atmosphere a little!? I-I looked like I was right in the middle of something, didn’t I!?”

“Huh? Ohh, I apologize about that. I just saw the chance right in front of me and went for it, you see ...”

Seto flashed a completely unrestrained grin, and stuck out his thumb.

“Jumping at the chance like that, are you a samurai!? Ahhh, I completely forgot what I was thinking about. Haah, well, whatever ..”

Just from being that tense for a short time, I was hit by an overwhelming lethargy. It probably wasn’t possible for me to become a serious character.

“Come now, Shintaro-san, it’ll be your loss if you don’t have fun today! We’ll come along with you, so how about a crash course on thrill rides!”

Bringing up the topic of that possibility out of nowhere, for some reason, his eyes were shining as if flames were ignited in them.

On the other hand, Kano muttered, “A crash course on attraction at eighteen, huh ....” and let out a delayed, stifled laugh a few seconds later.

“I won’t ride it again even if I die!! .... Anyway, you guys don’t have to stick around, so just go off somewhere without me ....”

In any case, I felt like it wasn’t a good idea to stay with them.

That’s right, it was nice to enjoy alone time by yourself sometimes.

No, wait a minute. Right now, Ene had moved to Momo’s cellphone, so the chance to be completely alone was .....

“—It has to be now!”

The moment that outburst left my mouth, my “desire to be alone” suddenly fired up.

Yes. Yes. Come to think of, because I was always *always* being stalked by Ene, I would never have a chance to be completely alone again if I passed this up now.

At this rate, it might even be possible for me to sprout wings if I truly believed.

Determined, I swiftly jumped to my feet.

Blinking hard in surprise, Kano looked over at me in confusion.

“Eh, what is it ....? What’s wrong all of a sudden, Shintaro-kun ..... Stroke?”

“What!? No, I just thought about going off to be by myself for a while!! Sorry, but don’t follow me! See ya!”

Saying this, I walked away from them quickly, and slipped into the crowds of people.

I continued on like this, gradually blending in with them until my figure would be lost amongst so many others.

Yes ....! I had acquired my desire to have alone time in such an unexpected place.

How long had it been since I’d had any kind of privacy?

Because of Ene, other than when I was in the bath or using the bathroom, I was constantly living in fear of something.

When I slept in my bed, I would be woken up suddenly; when I used the internet, she’d always interfere; and if it looked like I was looking at a shady website, I would be scolded by my sister ....

—But today, I had finally been released from that curse.

Suppressing the urge to scream “AHHHHHH THIS IS THE BEEEEEST,” I checked my surroundings again.

If this was a truly natural amusement park, there had to be someplace that I could enjoy an afternoon nap. No wait, if that person wasn’t here right now, I could even on the internet without any interruptions!!

Ahhh ... This is just like heaven. I'm so glad that I came today ....!

The world was overflowing with wonderful things. I was so sure that today would even turn into a wonderful day.

Surely, this was a gift from God, as reward for working so hard every da—

“Hey .....

So annoying .... I'm at a really good part right now, so don't talk to me.

Ahh .... Today is just so wonder—!

“Heey .... Shintaro, didn't you hear me?”

—When my name was called, I returned to reality at once.

Although I had one foot into a different world due to the feeling of freedom, that voice held me back from taking the final steps.

.... Just who was it?

When I looked around, that stood a very easily-recognizable girl with white, fluffy hair, and now teary-eyed.

“..... Why are you ignoring me ....?”

“Eh? Ah—Ahhhhh, I'm sorry I'm sorry! Umm, you're .... —right, Mary! Don't cry! Okay?”

Mary was making an extremely unhappy face. Was this because I hadn't replied to her for a few minutes? I had apologized, but Mary continued to pout with tears welling up in her eyes.

“.... Wh-what are you so upset for ....? Did something happen?”

In response to my question, Mary nodded sharply and pointed her right index finger at something.

The thing that she was gesturing to was a huge sign that indicated an attraction in the amusement part, saying "Great Ice Maze," along with a huge castle-like structure made entirely of ice.

"What is that? ... Are you trying to say you want to go in there?"

Before I even finished speaking, Mary began nodding vigorously.

.... Honestly, I wanted to say "Then why don't you just go in?" and get away from this place. I'd finally acquired this time to myself, so why should I have it stolen by that childish attraction?

At least, that was what I would have said if it was the me from a while back.

However, if I said that here and now, this girl would probably burst into tears.

.... And what would happen from there? Simple; the surrounding people would judge me to be none other than a pervert trying to harass an innocent girl.

For certain, I would be taken away by the security guards, and furthermore, my skills would be exposed: "High school dropout" "Unemployed" "Shut-in" "Virgin"  
.....

Based on that, I would receive the societal "death."

I wouldn't be able to talk my way out of it.

".... I got it, Mary. It's enough if I go in with you, right?"

"Yeah! I want to go in! Let's go in together, okay?"

As she said this, Mary's expression brightened in an instant, her once-moist eyes staring up at me and sparkling.

And so, the man, Shintaro(virgin)'s heartbeat rang out loud and clear.

Damn it .... What a shame.

I already had too many skills equipped.

It was unfortunate, but there did not exist a free slot to fit in the “lolicon” skill.

Farewell, “lolicon” skill.

Until the day should come that I lose my “virgin” skill, until then shall we meet again ....!

—And with that, without any particularly guilty feelings, Mary and I got in line for the “Great Ice Maze.”

It didn’t seem to be a very popular attraction, and with the length of the line, it would soon be our turn to be admitted.

However, something caught my interest. After I’d .... thrown up, the girls had gone off together on their own.

It wasn’t likely that they’d gotten into an argument and split up. If they had, Mary seemed like a girl that would be crying nonstop about it.

“Hey, where’s everyone else? Why’re you out here by yourself?”

“Eh? Ah, well, about that ... We went to ride the roller coaster again after that, but I was the only one that got in another line, and we got separated.”

Mary answered without even looking at me, as she was too engrossed in the pamphlet she had picked up at the entrance.

It would appear that she had circled all the places of the attractions that she wanted to go to with a red pen.

.... Wh-what an unexpectedly lively kid. She planned to go around the park all by herself ....

I had the impression that she was the type that would hate to be on her own, but was hit with a painful, sad feeling when I discovered that wasn’t the case.

“I-I see. Well, as long as Kido and Momo are together, it should be fine .... So, why did I have come along with you for this attraction, anyway?”

Mary seemed to be concentrating too much on her pamphlet to answer verbally, and instead pointed to a sign near the entrance.

When I looked at where she was pointing, I saw that there was a poster that said, “Admission to Pairs Only”.

I see. So there were these kinds of attractions.

I had a feeling that it would be something like this .... But I was still hit with that painfully sad feeling again.

As the line shortened, and we were next to go in, I started to feel a little excited.

Come to think of it, it'd been a while since I'd come to an amusement park.

... And thinking of it even further, this would be my first time experiencing an attraction alone with a girl.

When I glanced over at Mary, she had already put away her pamphlet, and seemed unable to suppress her excitement for the attraction up ahead.

"Sh-Shintaro, this is a Great Maze, isn't it ....? Do you think I should drink some tea quickly, just in case ....!?"

"Huh? Ah, I guess so. Why not?"

As soon as I said this, Mary took out a canteen from the pouch she was carrying, and seemed quite determined to take a drink from it.

Somehow or other, this girl was so pure ..... However ...

Damn it .....! Don't come, "lolicon" skill! I already said that there's no room for you!

"Alright, please go in next~"

The attendant person said this, and opened the door to the attraction.

From beyond the door came a cooler breeze than I had imagined.

Next thing I knew, it was our turn.

I quickly turned to Mary, and, sure enough, she was rushing so much that she wasn't able to put the lid on the canteen back on correctly.

"H-hey, Mary, there are other people waiting behind us, so put the lid back on once we're inside ...."

"O-okay ...!"

Mary replied, and teetered through the door.

When I followed her inside, it really was like an actual ice maze.

The road was lined with varying sizes of icicles that made it look like a surreal world from an RPG dungeon.

It was much colder than I expected, and the temperature cooled my warm body.

It had to be something like negative twenty degrees in here.

"Woah, it's pretty chilly in here. It's a good thing you warmed up earlier with the tea, Ma ....."

I trailed off, unable to believe what I was seeing.

Although it'd only been a couple seconds, Mary was standing there shivering with a pale expression, still holding onto the canteen.

"I-It's ..... s-s-s-so .... so c-cold ..... I-I'm going to d-d-die ....."

"..... What did you even come here for?"

I was stunned. This girl ..... Was she really so sensitive to the cold?

Why did she even choose this kind of attraction, then?

"I-I .... I d-didn't think ... it'd be this c-cold ....."

"....."

Although we'd barely made it past the "M" in "maze", figuratively speaking, Mary seemed like she'd already reached her goal, in a different manner of speaking.

"You can't possibly be that cold that suddenly! Anyway, it'll be dangerous if you drop that canteen, so give it here."

With how much Mary was shaking, it wouldn't be odd if she dropped that canteen at any moment.

The lid was still half-open, so if it fell, all of the contents would probably spill out.

If a drink spilled on the icy ground in this kind of frigid temperature, it'd become a problem for other guests.

"O-okay .... Thank yah--- .... Ah ... Achoo!!"

The moment Mary sneezed a huge sneeze, I had stooped over slightly to take the canteen, with my head bent—which then had tea poured right on top of it.

"—Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Not expecting this to happen at all, I jumped up and away.

Being drenched in cold tea in this temperature, my surroundings soon changed into a freezing hell.

"Wh-wh-wh-what're you do— ... Ah, ahh, ahhhh! C-c-c-cold ...."

My body temperature suddenly declined, and I began to shiver vigorously.

"E-Eek!! I-I'm sorry I'm sorry!! T-tissue ..."

As Mary began pulling out various items one-after-the-other from her pouch, the wet portions of the tea dripped down to my jersey, and quickly began to freeze over.

"U-Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! My ... My jerseyeeeeeeeeey!!"

"Eeeek!! I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sor ....."

\*

It was a terrible experience. In the end, Mary and I had retired and left the attraction right away, but before I even had time to be angry, Mary had run off somewhere.

"That girl ... really isn't what she seemed like at first .... Somehow, she's really .... *something* ...."

Right now, Mary was probably already having fun at the next attraction on her list.

I was left alone again, and in order to dry my clothes, I took a walk around the park.

It had been a horrible irregularity earlier, but this time, surely, I would have my precious private time—

“Sh-Shintaro ..... good timing .....! C-Come with me for a minute ....!”

Just when I passed by a crepe stand, my name was called once again. It was a characteristically husky voice, and I was able to grasp who it was without even turning around.

“What do you want, Kido ..... Wait, what!? Where’s Momo? If she’s not with you, then ....”

Kido was standing there, sweating and gasping for breath.

As expected, because of how hot it was, she had taken off her hood, and her long hair flowed freely in the wind.

However, Momo was nowhere to be seen. Even though we both knew that if Kido wasn’t with her, she’d draw more and more peoples’ attention due to her power .....

“That’s right ..... Momo’s in trouble .... So, please! I need your help. Anyway, just come with me .....!”

Momo was in trouble? No, I could already imagine what kind of trouble she was in, but what was the point of me going?

With all the large crowds in this amusement park, I really didn’t think I’d be any help at all if I went .....

However, Kido’s expression right now really didn’t suit her. It looked so frail, as if pleading me. Like I was really the only one she would count on.

.... Guess I had no choice. I’d just go along with her.

At any rate, I was really weak to the words, “I need your help.”

\*

—For about three minutes, I followed Kido through the park.

We stopped to stand at the entrance of an attraction called, “Spooky Mansion of Ghost Dolls.”

It was a classic in amusement parks; an eerie, western-styled building, with tombstones and even axes decorating the outside.

From inside the mansion, we occasionally heard the screams of the other guests, presumably, which added to the creepy atmosphere even further.

“.... Uh.”

I said, and then sighed.

“Wh-what is it, Shintaro? I can’t hear you, so speak up!”

We waited in line for ten minutes.

When we became third in line to go in, Kido casually put on her headphones.

And from there, she started muttering things, and occasionally, as if remembering something unpleasant, she flinched and closed her eyes repeatedly.

“..... You’re scared, aren’t you?”

I voiced what I had deducted from my observations in a slightly louder voice so that she would hear me, and Kido’s shoulders shook when she replied.

“I-Idiot! It’s not like I am or anything! The screaming is just noisy, that’s all! I-I wouldn’t be scared of this kind of kiddy stuff ....!”

Kido wouldn’t admit it at all, but her bright red face wasn’t doing anything in backing up her claims.

“Haah ... So, basically what happened is, Momo and you went into the haunted mansion together, and due to “certain circumstances,” you came out by yourself, and due to “certain circumstances,” aren’t able to go back in by yourself. Without you, Momo’s power will draw too many people’s attention, and that’s why she can’t come out and is still inside. That sound about right?”

“Y-Yeah! You’re pretty fast at figuring things out .... Not that I’d expect any less from you, Shintaro.”

Kido chuckled calmly, but honestly, in this situation, it was useless trying to look cool anymore.

“So, what are these “certain circumstances”? If the circumstances are that you can’t go into a haunted mansion, the only possibility is that you’re sca—”

“That’s not it at all!! It’s not, but .... I don’t know how to explain it to you!”

No matter how many times I tried asking, Kido would frantically deny it in this same manner, and wouldn’t answer at all.

Every time the staff person opened the doors to let in the next guest, her shoulders would shake. With how scared she was right now, the leader was completely useless.

The point was that she was scared to go in by herself, and simply needed someone else to come in with her.

Even if she hid her presence with her power, it would have no meaning inside the haunted mansion.

The most she could do was hide her screams from the other people around her.

However, since she kept insisting she wasn’t scared, I’d feel bad to keep pestering her around it, so I just played along.

“Looks like we’re finally next. Are you ready, Leader?”

I asked Kido, but I could hear that the volume of her music was already turned up so high that she couldn’t hear me at all.

But just by watching the staff person’s movements, she seemed to realize that it was our turn to go in next.

As we continued to approach the entrance, Kido's breathing gradually grew heavier.

Behind the door that the staff person opened, there were creepy western dolls and gory antiques scattered inside, which truly added onto the scary atmosphere shown on the outside.

The moment I saw all this, my own suppressed feelings of fear began to quickly bubble up.

When I looked beside me, Kido had become teary-eyed, but I wasn't able to make fun of her.

That was because I, too, had probably also become teary-eyed.

The entrance of the creepy, creaking mansion closed, inviting us into the pitch darkness as we walked in with our fear.

Once the doors closed, all light from the outside was cut off, and the only source of light came from the eerily flickering candles scattered around.

In a way different from the ice maze from before, my body was chilled from the feet upwards.

The two of us were overwhelmed by this strange atmosphere, and soon found ourselves unable to proceed any further.

"H-huh, it's rather well done .... Isn't it, Kido ....?"

Although I'd never dealt with a girl being scared before, I turned around, and saw that Kido had closed her eyes from fear, and was immersed in the world of music. I immediately pulled the earphones out and confiscated the music player she had in her pocket.

"Uwaaaah!! What're you doing, Shintaro!? G-g-give it back!"

"Are you an idiot!? I don't even know where Momo is, so if you just ignore me, what am I supposed to do!?"

“That’s true .... But ....!”

Without her earphones, Kido had started shaking like a newborn goat. Because her behavior right now was so far from her usual, dependable and firm attitude, I became even more anxious.

But it would be no use just standing here.

In order to get away from here as soon as possible, there was so choice but to push onward.

I somehow forced my legs to move, and Kido followed a step behind me.

Although slowly, we steadily began to go in deeper, and because of the characteristic musty smell of haunted houses and also the BGM, it was scary just doing so.

Things like the portrait of a headless person in the hallway, and the hanging scythe, made us fear that something would jump out at any moment.

I narrowed my eyes and walked in a bent position so that I wouldn’t have to look at them so much.

Kido also copied my stance. People might wonder what we were doing when we were fully-grown teenagers, but I didn’t give a damn. This was necessary.

“.... Anyway, you’ve been in here once already, haven’t you? So shouldn’t you know what’s going to come out from where?”

I turned to face Kido, but she had her eyes closed and ears covered, as if she didn’t want to listen to me.

“Wh-what’s with you? Don’t ignore ....”

As I was saying this, and was just about to reach my hand out to Kido, the doll that was lying in the path started to talk.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! What’s with this thing!?”

"The owner of this mansion was once a doll collector, but one day, he went mad, and become a murderer that turned the guests that he invited to the mansion into dolls, one by one. I wonder if you'll be able to leave this place alive ....! Hee hee hee .....!"

The shock I received made my heart seem ready to leap out of my chest, and I jumped back and collapsed right there in the path.

Don't kid with me; *what* murderer!? Before we talk about any murderer, I already felt like I was going to die from the shock of *your* appearance.

Kido stood next to my collapsed figure, took her hands away from her ears with a relieved expression, and looked down at me in apology.

"You .... You knew about this, didn't you .... That's why you covered your ears, isn't it .....!?"

"N-no, sorry about that. I thought about telling you, but because I was covering my ears, I was trying not to .... No .... I thought this was some kind of trial for you."

Kido started to say something, but hastily changed the topic.

"What trial!? You were scared and covering your ears, weren't you!?"

"I-I'm not scared!! That's just sometimes— ....!"

Kido realized what she was saying, and quickly walked off to the back.

Had she suddenly been released from her fear? No, she couldn't have. I had a feeling that Kido was a genuine coward.

However, that would mean .....

I only got so far in my thoughts when I suddenly had a bad feeling.

I slowly turned around to look back on the path we had been walking on, and saw people that had probably been mercilessly killed by the mansion's owner, wearing blood-stained western-style clothing, and coming this way.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!! I'm sorry I'm sorry! Please spare me!!!"

I knelt down on the ground in apology with overwhelming speed, and then bolted up from the ground and ran in the opposite direction of the zombies. What was up with those guys!? No, they were all extras for the attraction. But because they had acted so realistically, I'd genuinely pleaded for my life.

Although I soon caught up with Kido, who had gone on ahead, Kido, being Kido, had gotten her arm caught by a myriad of hands that had come out of the wall, and looked like she was about to foam at the mouth.

"Uwaaaaaah! L-let go me meee!! Stop itttt!!"

She was so desperate; you'd forget that this was all just part of the attraction.

And then, the extras on the other side of the wall swiftly retracted their hands.

Thanks for all your hard work. Now please don't come out again.

"Haa .... Haa ..... Sorry about that, Shintaro. You really helped me out there ....."

"Hey, don't just leave me behind and run off!! I was really scared there!!"

"Eh? A-ahh, I'm sorry, honestly. I just remembered some important business, so ...."

As she said this, Kido looked like she was going to be sick again, and looked away.

—Without a doubt, she really was completely useless.

".... Anyway, where did you and Momo split up? Is it a little further ahead?"

".... I-it was around the next corner. Probably ...."

Leaving the zone where the hands came out of the wall, and turning the next corner as Kido had said, we arrived at a path where there were rows of coffins lined up on either side. .... If I remembered correctly, didn't the owner of this mansion turn his guests into dolls?

Then what was the use of coffins?

However, if I were to really thin about it, the bloody zombies didn't make sense either, and the hands coming out of the way made even less sense.

I was far from being a guy that would point out these little details, but to think that we'd been so scared of this kind of attraction ..... At any rate, we continued onwards, and then, for a split-second, I saw a glimpse of brown hair from behind a coffin on the right.

"..... There."

Once I muttered this, Kido jumped back in an instant.

"Wh-wh-what is!? Where!? Oi, Shintaro!"

"No, it's not a ghost! Look, Momo's hiding over there."

Kido looked to where I was pointing, and after seeing what appeared to be Momo's hair, her shoulders relaxed.

"Oh, it's just Kisaragi ..... I'm glad we found her. You have my thanks, Shintaro."

Kido stuffed her hands in the pocket of her parka and tried to look cool again, but by now, I could only see it as a gag.

"L-leaderrr ....."

We heard Momo's voice from behind the coffin. She probably wasn't coming out because she was waiting for Kido to come closer.

.... But there were only the three of us here right now, so I didn't think it would be a problem even if she walked out in plain sight.

"Kisaragi! It's me! I'm sorry about leaving you behind, but you can come — .....!!"

Kido moved closer to the mound of coffins while speaking.

However, when Momo turned around, Kido fainted at the sight.

Watching from afar, I'd also been surprised, but to faint without even screaming was worthy of a medal.

"H-huh!? Leader!? D-did I scare her too much ....?"

Coming out from behind the coffin, Momo's face was covered in blood, and there was an ax stuck in her head.

Approaching Kido while looking like that, it looked like she was attacking her.

"..... What are you even doing ....."

Momo noticed me when I came closer, and turned around quickly.

Seeing her up close, she really did look terrible.



“Eh!? Onii-chan, you came into the haunted mansion!? Even though you get scared so easily ....”

Covered in blood, Momo made a face as if she were genuinely surprised.

“If it’s something of this level, of course I can come in!! So? What’s with you looking like that?”

“Oh, this? Well, after Leader left me, I hid here, but then I found this ax prop. And then, I thought I might as well scare her with it when she came, so I was waiting this whole time with make-up on. I didn’t think it’d work this well .....

My sister really was terrible for making her leader faint.

However, as long as Kido was unconscious, we wouldn’t be able to get out of here.

“What’re you gonna do, huh!? We can’t get out like this!”

“Uwaaaaaah! Y-you’re right! Wh-what should we do .... Oh, I know, if we just wake her up .....

Saying this, Momo gently shook Kido’s body.

“No, first, do something about that face of yours! If she wakes up now and sees your face, she’ll faint again!”

“Th-that’s true!”

Nodding quickly in agreement, Momo darted behind the coffins again.

If we left Kido here, the other guests that came would probably be really freaked out.

I had no other choice, so I dragged Kido along and also went behind the coffins.

Momo had crouched down, removed the ax from her head, and begun to wipe the make up from her face with a wet tissue she’d taken out of her pouch.

I sat down beside her, and heaved a sigh.

In the end, I hadn’t been able to be on my own and enjoy my private time at all.

"Somehow, I'm extremely worn out ....."

"I'm sorry .... It's my fault that things turned into a mess."

After she finished wiping her face, Momo said this in apology, and took out her cell phone.

There, she had set the group photo taken this morning as "celebration for her cell phone's revival" as her wallpaper. However, after cropping it to wallpaper size, I had been cut out of the frame, so it hadn't been a very good photo.

"It's gotten pretty late .... But we still have a little time left to play, right?"

Closing her cell phone, Momo gently shook Kido's body, who had been placed beside her.

"Leader, Leader! Wake up! The amusement part is going to close!"

"..... U-unngh .... Huh!? Kisaragi! Wh-why was I asleep here?"

Kido sat up quickly, and looked around at her surroundings. It would seem that she didn't remember being scared by Momo and fainting.

"Ah .... Um ..... You just fainted, all of a sudden?"

Momo said this while avoiding eye contact with Kido, and lightly winked in my direction.

"I-I see ..... Well, whatever. We've met up with Kisaragi now, so let's leave here soon."

After saying this, Kido's eyes changed from black to red.

"For the time being, I've made it so that only Momo won't be visible. Shintaro and I, we'll leave just as-is."

When I turned to where Momo had been crouching, I could no longer see her.

If I focused my eyes and concentrated, I could tell that she was there, and once again, I realized how convenient this power was.

If someone like me has this kind of power .... Then maybe, I would be able to go into a public bathhouse.

Putting that aside, I stood up and walked out into the path again, and headed for the exit.

I thought about how I hadn't been able to calm down for a while now, and my mood grew heavy.

Ever since I'd started walking at that time, I'd felt a kind of unease for some reason.

I'd started feeling like this since meeting up with Momo, but when I really thought about it, I understood the reason immediately.

No, but wait just a minute. "If that were true," then everything that had gone on since then .....

For just a moment, I felt a chill, and decided to ask Kido, who had started shaking again.

When I stopped walking, Kido also stopped.

"..... Hm? What's wrong, Shintaro? Come on, let's get a move on."

No .... My hunch was probably right.

Because I had unconsciously confirmed it just a while ago.

"Hey .... Kido. After we rode the roller coaster .... What happened to Ene?"

Hearing this, Kido made a face as if it were obvious.

"Ene? Right after that, she said she'd be going with you, and disappeared ....."

—As soon as she said this, the cell phone in my pocket vibrated cheerfully, as if laughing.

\*

Once again, I sat alone on a bench.

“U-Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!! My ... My jerseyeeeeeeeeey!!”

At first, that haunted mansion had been scary, but later, it hadn't been at all.

In the end, it was just an attraction at an amusement park. No big deal.

After we'd come out, Momo and Kido had gone off to search for the other members, saying that they'd contact me once they'd met up with Mary and everyone else.

The two guys aside, Mary probably didn't have a cell phone, so it seemed like it would turn into a challenging task.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!! I'm sorry I'm sorry! Please spare me!!”

In the end, my dream of private time had been an illusion.

Was this the result of sprouting wings so poorly .....? Ah, how pitiful .....

“Ugh ..... I feel siiick ..... Uee ..... Ughh .....”

“—Ahhhhhhhhhhh!! Stop!! Don't play that!!”

When I finally yelled at the cell phone I held in my hand, a girl with blue twin tails ran into view of the screen, grinning widely.

“Aaah, my stomach hurts .....! Oh, I do apologize. It's just that Master has provided such wonderful material that—pfft!! Ahahah!!”

“Who's material, huh!? ..... Ahh .... If I'd know you were there, I would have stuck duct tape over my mouth .....”

“Higyaaaaaaaaah!! Gyaaaaaaaaah!! That scared meee!! What’s with this thing!? I’m sorry I’m sorry!! ..... I feel siiiiiick.”

Even though I was being overwhelmed with despair, Ene was still roaring with laughing, cutting and pasting together a “scream sound sampling.”

In the end, it turned out that she’d been in my cell phone since that time I was talking with Kano and Seto.

And, recording all of the times I’d looked and sounded like an idiot, she was currently addicted to using them as a new way of having fun.

“I should think that’s enough for now ..... Phew. Now then! Master! Did you have fun today?”

Grinning and coming up close so that her face filled the screen, she asked me this happily, but I felt not a shred of goodwill from her face.

“..... Yeah .... Because of you, I had the worst day. Thanks a lot.”

Even if I got angry about being dragged along by her, I knew that it would be no use.

However, I gripped the phone I had in my hand with so much force, the display might crack.

“Oh, no, it’s much too early to call it a day, you know? After all, I still haven’t played at all yet! We still have a long way to go!!”

“What!? Haven’t you had more than enough fun!? Let’s just go home already ....”

“No way! I still haven’t had any fun at all! Master promised that we would play together. *I haven’t forgotten.*”

Saying this, Ene’s face swelled up even more than it usually did when she was trying to intimidate me.

In times like this, I’d be forced into saying the right thing, and the rest would be history; it was the usual pattern.

There had been a time previously where she’d said, “Let’s play a game together.”

At that time, I'd decided to thoroughly ignore her, but immediately afterwards, my computer was infected with a multitude of viruses, and as a result of their destruction, I ended up even having to pay money for the game that we played.

.... Thinking about all the troublesome things that would follow, it probably a good idea to not compromise her mood from the start.

However, even that was a pain .....

"..... If you won't play with me, then I'll send Master's precious folder to the little sister, and ....."

"Aaalright! I feel like having fun now!! So, which one should we ride first!? Preferably one that doesn't move so much!"

I was desperate. I stood up from the bench and faced Ene. A very satisfied and triumphant expression spread on her face.

As for me, I still wasn't fully satisfied with my first outing in so long.

It was a little annoying to have to be with her, but it was the amusement park, after all.

I also still wanted to have a little more fun.

"As I thought, Master!! Then, first is ..... Ah! What about that one!? The one where you sit in a chair and fire at aliens!! Master, you're good at shooting games, right?"

"Haaah? How do you know something like that? We've never even played one together, have we?"

"Oh, is that so? Well, no matter. I know everything there is to know about Master! More importantly, let's hurry up and go!"

Ene said this, and pointed in the direction of the destination.

"..... Fine ..... 'Can't be helped, so I'll tag along with you. Just try not to make so much of a fuss, would you ....?"

"Got it!"

Ene answered with a broad smile.

She was really such a selfish,

Ill-tempered,

And elusive thing.

I almost started reminiscing about the past, but I stopped myself.

I had enough on my plate right now, just listening to her selfish requests.

—Until the sun sets, how much would we be able to play?

I held the phone like a compass, and began walking in the direction Ene pointed in  
....

